

JOHN WILSON (1785-1854) AS CRITIC

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John Wilson (1785 - 1854)

As Critic

And the first which came was after the likeness of the beautiful leopard,
from the valley of the palm trees, whose going forth was comely as the greyhound, and his
eyes like the lightning of fiery flame.

Chaldee Manuscript

Susan G Rowe

M. Phil. (Mode A)

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University of St Andrews



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John Wilson

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Abstract

This thesis has two main aims. First, to draw attention to the writings of a little-known literary critic. Second, to evaluate the writings of John Wilson in relation to the literature he loved, and the age in which he lived.

The thesis is constructed in four parts: Part A is an introductory chapter which defines the enquiry of the thesis: the position of Wilson as a critic and the range of his criticism.

Part B describes Wilson's life and background in two sections, his life up to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, and his life after Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in Edinburgh.

Part C is an analysis of his critical theory, and the relation of romantic principle to literary criticism.

Part D is an appraisal of his judgements and reviews, which are separated into three sections: English poets, Scottish poets, and the writings of Shakespeare. They are chosen to show the chronology of his critical development in relation to his intellectual growth. Each section is prefaced with an introduction and a conclusion and there is a final chapter and conclusion which is a summing up of the critical position.

The bibliography is in three parts: 1. on texts and biographia (primary sources) 2. on criticism (secondary sources) 3. articles which have been consulted during the thesis.

There is also an appendix which lists Wilson's contributions to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, in two parts: 1. assumed contributions between 1817-1825 2. contributions from 1826.

I, Susan Geraldine Rowe, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately seventy eight thousand words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date.....16th December 1994

Signature of Candidate.....

I was admitted as a research student under Ordinance No. 12 in October, 1988, and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. (Mode A) in October 1988; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1988 and 1994

Date.....16th December 1994

Signature of Candidate.....

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of M.Phil. (Mode A) in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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A thesis is enhanced by its presentation, and I was fortunate to obtain the typing skills of Helen Kay, who courageously agreed to undertake the typing. I owe Helen a debt of gratitude for her patience and perseverance.

To the University of St Andrews for giving me permission to attend Department seminars throughout my period of study.

To the Memory of my Godmother
and of my Father

Abbreviations used

<u>BM</u>	:	Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine
<u>CBEL</u>	:	Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature
<u>CHEL</u>	:	Cambridge History of English Literature
<u>ER</u>	:	Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal
<u>FR</u>	:	Fraser's Magazine
<u>MLN</u>	:	Modern Language Notes
<u>MLR</u>	:	Modern Language Review
<u>MP</u>	:	Modern Philology
<u>PMLA</u>	:	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
<u>QR</u>	:	Quarterly Review
<u>SJ</u>	:	Shakespeare Jahrbuch
<u>SLJ</u>	:	Scottish Literary Journal
<u>SP</u>	:	Studies in Philology
<u>SR</u>	:	Studies in Romanticism
<u>UP</u>	:	University Publications
<u>YES</u>	:	Year Book of English Studies
<u>WC</u>	:	Wordsworth Circle

The abbreviation BM is used throughout the thesis to refer to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine. The volume and dates are: 1 April - September 1817; 2 October 1817-March 1818; 3 April-September 1818; 4 October 1818-March 1819; 5 April-September 1819; 6 October 1819-March 1820; 7 April-September 1820; 8 October 1820-March 1821; 9 April-August 1821; 10 August-December 1821. After this regularisation in 1821 there were two volumes per year, January-June and July-December, as follows: 11, 12 (1822); 13, 14 (1823); 15, 16 (1824); 17, 18 (1825); 19, 20 (1826); 21, 22 (1827); 23, 24 (1828); 25, 26 (1829); 27, 28 (1830); 29, 30 (1831); 31, 32 (1832); 33, 34 (1833); 35, 36 (1834).

Minds like ours, my dear James, must always be above national prejudices, and in all companies it gives me true pleasure to declare, that, as a people, the English are very little indeed inferior to the Scotch.

Blackwood's Magazine (October 1826) 'Noctes Ambrosianae' no. 20

His Majesty's dominions, on which the sun never sets.

Blackwood's Magazine (April 1829) 'Noctes Ambrosianae' no. 42

Laws were made to be broken.

Blackwood's Magazine (May 1830) 'Noctes Ambrosianae' no. 49

Part A: Introduction

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The country has lost another of its great literary celebrities. Having all but completed his three score years and ten, the poet of the "Isle of Palms" - the author of the inextinguishable laughter of the "Noctes" - the brilliant and high-toned lecturer on man's moral Being, has been gathered to his fathers. He was the last of the galaxy of poets which the past generation produced; and, as such, his death marks an era. Byron, Southey, Moore, Wordsworth, Campbell, Coleridge, Scott and now Wilson, are all gone: and we are fairly entered on a new era, and a new school of poetry, which, though exhibiting abundant beauty of its own, is not likely to rival either in popularity or in enduring fame, that of the generation now closed. On a level with none of these illustrious authors mentioned above would we place Wilson as a poet, but as a man he was greater than any of them: and we feel, while paying this just but feeble tribute to his memory, that it is no vain phrase to say that, "take him all in all, we ne'er shall look upon his like again."¹

Such was the judgement of a writer in the Dublin University Magazine a month after the death of Professor Wilson in April 1854. A tribute of this order was enough to indicate that John Wilson was, in the restricted sense, an outstanding scholar and literary figure of his day. Writing in a letter to J.G. Lockhart, in 1834, he commented, "I am at the Head of Scottish literature. Pray, then, who is at the Tail? and who constitutes the Body? I think of the boy who was Dux of his class. On this side of the Border, of course, Mr. Chairman, I rise to propose Professor Wilson and the Literature of Scotland."² With the recent death of Scott, this was not an exaggeration: he seemingly towered intellectually and physically over the Scottish literary scene, and his reputation even extended south of the border when Charles Dickens, visiting Edinburgh in 1841, met him and was highly impressed. Thomas Carlyle, a contemporary critic, recorded his first impression of Wilson, '--- a human character of fine and noble elements, thought I,

but not at one with itself; an exuberant enough, leafy and tropical kind of tree rather exhaling itself in balmy odours than producing fruit.¹³ Carlyle's personal description is conveyed in his characteristically graphic style, 'the broad-shouldered stately bulk of the man struck me: his flashing eye, copious disshevelled head of hair, and rapid unconcerned progress like that of a plough through stubble.'¹⁴ Helen Martineau's obituary of 1854 recorded that, 'such a presence is rarely seen and more than one person has said that he reminded them of the first man, Adam; so full was that large frame of vitality, force and sentence. --'¹⁵ Writing in the Memoirs of John Wilson, Mrs. Gordon described John Wilson as 'possessing a singular character in virtue of which he stands out as unique and inimitable among British men of genius, as Jean Paul, *Der Einzige*, among his countrymen.'¹⁶ Although today few share this sentiment, Wilson was, by all accounts, a remarkable man whose character attracted as much interest as his criticism. Gifted with exceptional physical energy and a clear enquiring mind, he was a poet, lawyer, novelist, orator, painter, essayist, critic, moralist, journalist, and philosopher. This thesis is concerned with his role as a literary critic, as the man who was better known as 'Christopher North', the chief contributor to BM, and who signed himself 'Z' or 'C'. He was a professional critic who also had the authority of Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, and as an intellectual and a man of letters he combined in his criticism the instruction of the philosopher with the sensibility of a poet. His joy of life came from an inner peace and happiness, and criticism gave him the ability to translate his feelings into literature and transfer life to Art. As a practical critic he believed he could do good and yet entertain and give pleasure to a lot of people. His sense of fun and love of literature off-set his serious moral upbringing and passionate belief in virtue, and for him virtue was the imagination. From his poetic mind he wove a tapestry which was an intellectual vision and also his expression of life and art.

The word 'critic' is derived from the Greek term *Krites* meaning 'judge', and as I.A. Richards notes, 'To set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values.'¹⁷ But to speak of criticism with reference to Wilson means much more than a judgement of literary men

and their books; it was an expression of his philosophy of nature and art, and his judgement of human nature and society. Wilson's reputation as a critic is still marginal, but his criticism, judged by its quantity, quality, and scope, must rank as a major area of his achievement. It is chiefly represented by his Noctes Ambrosianae, which was written under the pseudonym of 'Christopher North' as part of his contribution to the newly started BM, but noteworthy criticism appeared in reviews and essays within the periodical, later to be collected together in twelve volumes edited by Professor Ferrier, including four of Noctes, three of Recreations, three of Tales and Poetry, and two of Critical Essays. His primary interests as a literary critic were the classics, the early English dramatists, including Shakespeare, and the literature of the early nineteenth century, especially the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Spenser, and Byron, and the Scottish poetry of Burns, Thomson, and Ramsay. Initially, he wrote regular criticism, not for his personal satisfaction as a poet, or as an interesting hobby but in order to provide a steady income for himself and his family. His career as a journalist had started seriously in 1816 and was to continue for another thirty years, alongside his second career as a philosopher, until a few months before his death in 1854 at the age of almost sixty nine. The literary critic was to operate like a sympathetic guide who desired only to instruct and to entertain, and as 'a cheerful companion and a trusty guide'⁸ Wilson intended to be useful. He defined a critic as 'a poet without a creation',⁹ not concerned with fault-finding, but with the emphasis on creativity, stimulating readers to feel in their heart and mind. How successful this was can be seen by the opinions of contemporary and modern critics: Thomas Carlyle summed up Wilson's position as a critic by stating that 'he had written nothing that would endure--',¹⁰ the reason being that 'his mind was a florigem of thought.'¹¹ George Saintsbury commented that his criticism was 'a genial chaos; but first of all, and, I fear, last of all, chaotic.'¹² Amongst modern critics, David Daiches described him as, 'an utterly irresponsible critic, liable to be carried away by his own verve and gusto and precipitated into saying the most outrageous things.--- His criticism is unprincipled and erratic.'¹³ Andrew Noble considered that Wilson was 'the clay-footed prophet of the

British-Scots middle-class',¹⁴ who had created 'a flatulent rhetoric of national feeling as an antidote to either true national consciousness or will. He exploited nationalism and religion in order to pursue class politics.'¹⁵ Elsie Swann maintained that 'he attained to no abiding theory of art.'¹⁶ This was contrasted by the statement of Mrs. Gordon, Wilson's daughter, that his writings contained 'the highest criticism available';¹⁷ also, R. Patterson, writing in Essays in History and Art, says, 'As a critic, Professor Wilson was never equalled in his peculiar walk.'¹⁸ H. Furness, the editor of the New Variorum Edition of Hamlet, refers to Wilson, with Schlegel, Garrick, Hazlitt and Mrs Jameson as 'master-minds', commentators upon Shakespeare. The truth probably lies somewhere between these conflicting statements.

An understanding of the criticism depends very much on the understanding of Wilson himself and his many-sided character. In 1865 John Stuart Mill wrote, in his essay on Coleridge:

Coleridge used to say that every one is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian: it may be similarly affirmed that every Englishman of the present day is by implication either a Benthamite or a Coleridgean; hold views of human affairs which can only be proved true of the principals either of Bentham or Coleridge.¹⁹

Mill's distinction is very useful as corresponding to it may be distinguished two different principles of aesthetic theory, the one mainly metaphysical, and the other essentially psychological. Similarly, it reflects two different attitudes of mind and temperament, and Wilson was a mixture of both. As Andrew Noble pointed out, Wilson was a betrayer of himself, and other people, and his own principles; he was a creature of contraries and paradox, who admitted that 'though averse to being cut myself I like to abuse my friends';²⁰ a romantic idealist yet a down-to-earth realist and a utilitarian who placed a sense of duty above beauty, a robust sportsman yet a gentle poet; a lover of nature and all animals, yet an angler and a hunter; a loner, who liked people and was gregarious. De Quincey, who knew him best and longest, regarded him as having a 'versatility and ambidexterity of which we

find such eminent models in Alcibiades, in Caesar, in Crichton, in that of Servan recorded by Sully, and in one or two Italians'.²¹ Beauty and utility are the two principles in his writings, and the criticism is held together by the theme of romanticism. Although he loved beauty, he still commented, 'All the beauty and sublimity on earth - over the Four Quarters of the World - is not worth a straw if valued against a good harvest.'²² Also, he asked, 'What are the poetical fancies about "mountain scenery," that ever fluttered on the leaves of albums, in comparison with any scheme, however prosaic, that tends in any way to increase human comforts?'²³ The result was an uneven criticism, and a contradiction which resulted in no criticism. Nevertheless, it is always interesting and stimulating even if verbose and rhapsodical with a tendency towards digression and exaggeration.

In order to develop a thesis questions must be asked to generate first a climate and then the answers which are relevant to the enquiry. Certain questions arise, namely, 1. What was the purpose of his criticism? 2. Does he have any system? 3. Is the criticism judicial or does it evaluate? 4. What is the source of his criticism? 5. Where does he stand in relation to his peers? This raises other questions: (a) What does he contribute in his criticism? (b) What does he leave out? (c) Why does he abuse his friends? (d) What was the source of his art? (e) What motivates him? This thesis is an attempt to answer these questions.

The aim of this thesis is to provide a heightened awareness of Wilson's position in romanticism, and a better understanding of his poetic mind and why he deserves to be researched. It is not simply an appraisal or evaluation of his strengths and weaknesses as a critic but the fact that in his mind different forces met which made him interesting. In 1856 Mrs. Gordon produced A Memoir of John Wilson in two volumes, and in 1934 Elsie Swann wrote a biography, Christopher North, but apart from occasional articles by modern critics he has lapsed into obscurity. The undervaluation of Wilson as a critic may be due in part to basic causes inherent in the criticism itself, namely, 1. its distinctive form, tone, and style. The overall impression is of a rhapsodical style conveyed with great force by a personality

which always appears to dominate his writings. 2. The absence of primary sources 3. His temperament, and what Carlyle called his lack of a 'central tie-beam'²⁴ 4. His inclusion of philosophy which is infiltrated into the writings. He evolved no intellectual system, and does not stand beside the giants of periodical criticism such as Hazlitt or Steele. But his ability to penetrate and understand other's minds, and to educate people to think and feel ensure that his insight and his judgements should have respect and that he deserves more recognition in periodical criticism.

Part B: John Wilson (1785-1854):

Biography and Background

CHAPTER TWO

Biography and Background

Introduction

It is important to understand that the background to Wilson's mind as a writer, and the ideals which inspired him are shaped by his early experiences. This is why a biographical essay can enhance the reading of a critic.

John Wilson's creative work grew out of the historical reality of the eighteenth century, the romantic poetry of the Lake School, the early romantic ballads and Scottish poetry, and the influence of Wordsworth and the Scottish philosophers. But Wilson's romanticism had a sound realistic concept of the world, derived from the Scottish Commonsense School, and this is characteristic of his essays on political economy, historical events, and real subjects. Civil and philosophical themes as well as a subjective self-consciousness clashed with metaphysical forces and were interwoven in his criticism. Edinburgh, not where he was born, but his adopted home, was the subject of intellectual forces. It was the 'Modern Athens', and home of important Scottish periodicals. Politics and periodical criticism was inter-related, and the literary scene was dominated by three main periodicals, the Tory BM, the Whig Edinburgh Review and the London. It was an age of transition, from an old order to a new industrial one; as Wilson wrote in the Essays, 'These are mechanical times in which we live; -- Science, the son of Intellect is sole sovereign'.¹ But it was also 'an intellectual and imaginative age',² and 'The age of genius. A more poetical age never flourished. Thought and passion are prevalent in its highest literature.'³ It was a position between the Enlightenment and late Romanticism. In the eighteenth century, the Romantic attitude was a reaction against classical beliefs and values and an emphasis on feeling or emotion; a decline of rationalism and an increasing regard for the emotions which had replaced reason. The appeal was not to reason or the emotions but to experience, (derived from the senses), and a greater emphasis on sensibility. Knowledge was

no longer cognitive but acquired from the senses, although containing an element of the cognitive. It was an age of aesthetics and associationist psychology, with an interest in the self and the working of the mind which was seen as psychological and subjective, resulting in a tension between feelings (subjective) and understanding (reason) which was objective. There were two main effects, the rise of the philosopher as an enquirer into knowledge - Adam Smith and David Hume had gone, but power was still held by Dugald Stewart, John Playfair, and Adam Ferguson - and the continuation of an aesthetic movement which had begun at the end of the seventeenth century. The term 'aesthetics' was not known in the eighteenth century, but was referred to as 'philosophical criticism.' It was associated with beauty as a feeling or evaluation. Beauty was considered psychologically, and referred not only to art but entered into other faculties, such as the moral and intellectual. The concept of taste was identified with feelings and developed into aesthetic judgements, which were made by reason, but sensed and judged by the faculty of the imagination. Emotion was the source of judgement, and the beautiful was associated with the new feelings of power, and grandeur and unlimited space raised up in the mind by the response to beauty.

There was also a change in the relationship between man and nature: nature was not only a dramatic background, but taken up into the mental (consciousness) it became the source of imagination and feeling for the critic on which to base his criticism. Art was seen as an imitation of nature, based on the same principles of emotion appealing through the senses to the imagination; it was a sensory expression realised through making aesthetic judgements which appealed to the eye and the ear and the imagination. In Art, beauty arises from the creator; it is internal, not external as in nature, but both share beauty and both give pleasure. Imagination unifies by extending sympathy to the artist in Art, in nature to the Creator; both are the highest expression of spirit (Truth), appealing directly to the mind of the artist and to the mind of God, the Creator. By persistent cultivation, the faculty of taste and imagination could be developed, and the reader educated aesthetically to sense the qualities of the beautiful in literature, in Nature and in Art.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the state of periodical reviewing was bound up inseparably with politics. Magazines were available and simple formal reviews,

but Wilson had a low opinion of these. There was war between rival periodicals - the Whigs and Tories - and reviewers were guided by their politics rather than their good judgement. Wilson refuted the charge that periodical literature had degraded all literature of the age, noting that 'There is intolerable impertinence in such opinions - and disgusting ignorance. Where is the body of philosophical criticism, of which these prigs keep prating, to be found? Aristotle's Poetics is an admirable manual - as far as it goes - but no more than a manual - outlines for a philosophical lecturer to fill up into a theory. Quintilian is fuller - but often false and oftener feeble - and too formal by far. Longinus was a man of fine enthusiasm, and wrote from an awakened spirit. But he was not a master of principles - though to a writer so eloquent I shall not deny the glory of deserving that famous panegyric -

"And is himself the Great Sublime he draws."⁴

A change, or revolution, has been taking place in the critical world and poetry and criticism are now working together. The combination of thought and feeling which makes up the present modern philosophical criticism is found in most periodicals, which infuse it into peoples' consciousness: 'It is poured daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, into the veins of the people, mixing with their very heart-blood. Nay, it is like the very air they breathe ... Our current periodical literature teems with thought and feeling, James - with passion and imagination.'⁵ Wilson includes a discussion in the Noctes of celebrated critics, ranging from Aristotle 'the best of critics',⁶ to the present, with the emphasis on the emotional and creative aspects of criticism. He notes,

There was Gifford, and there was Jeffrey, and Southey, and Campbell, and Moore, and Bowles, and Sir Walter, and Lockhart, and Lamb, and Wilson, and De Quincey, and the four Coleridges, S.T.C., John Hartley, and Derwent, and Croly, and Maginn, and Mackintosh, and Cunningham, and Kennedy, and Stebbings, and St. Ledger, and Knight, and Praed, and Lord Dudley and Ward, and Lord L. Gower, and Charles Grant, and Hobhouse, and Blunt, and Milman, and Carlyle, and Macaulay, and the two Moirs, and Jerdan, and Talfound, and Bowring, and North, and Hogg, and Tickler, and 'twenty - forty - fifty - other crack contributors to the Reviews, Magazines, and Gazettes, who have said more tender, and true, and fine

and deep things in the way of criticism, than ever was said before since the reign of Cadmus ten thousand times over, - not in long, dull, heavy formal, prosy theories, - but flung off-hand, out of the glowing mint - a coinage if the purest ore - and stamped with the ineffaceable impress of genius'.⁷

Wilson felt that French and German criticism was not comparable with the superiority of Scotch critics, the truth being that 'the soil of Scotland is most happily adapted for the cultivation of philosophical criticism.'⁸ Among Scotch critics of a former age, he cited Gerard, and Beattie, and Campbell, and Kames, and Blair as all writers of 'great merit'.⁹ Kames he described as 'the father of such criticism in this country, the Scottish - and not the Irish - Stagirite.'¹⁰ Beattie was 'the best critic (the present company excepted) that has yet been produced by Scotland.'¹¹ He condemned Wordsworth for attacking Hume and Adam Smith as they had formed their taste on classical models. He quoted Dugald Stewart amongst our present critics for endorsing the 'First Order of Critics, being 'generous, enthusiastic, and impassioned,'¹² and Wilson aimed to revive the genre of periodical literature with his criticism in BM. He intended to make the BM the Prime Agent of critical change and allow it to be said, 'For Francis Jeffrey, and Christopher North, that the one set agoing all the reviews, and the other all the magazines which now periodically, that is, perpetually, illumine the world.'¹³

a. Wilson's Birth and Early Years (1785-1816)

The characteristics of Wilson as a critic had been formulated in early life. Of semi-aristocratic stock, the author of the *Noctes Ambrosianae* was born John Wilson on 18 May, 1785, in Paisley, the eldest son and fourth child of a family of twelve children. His father, John Wilson, was a wealthy merchant who had acquired his fortune as a gauze manufacturer. His integrity of character and mercantile successes gave him an important position in society, and he became one of the richest and most respected of its community. His mother, Margaret Sym, was descended from the Marquis of Montrose, and from his mother's side Wilson inherited his personal beauty of a refined and dignified type. She was a considerable influence over Wilson, combining intellect and wit, with humour and wisdom.

Wilson immortalised his boyhood in the Recreations. The beautiful, undulating countryside surrounding him awakened a love of nature in a child's heart, and this force flowed outward and upward in his mental development. He described himself as 'a devout worshipper of Nature, an enthusiast in the sublime.'¹⁴ As a young child he showed an ability for drawing, and he developed a youthful passion for the observation of nature and an early interest in natural history, which helped him to acquire the foundations of observation and judgement which were essential qualities for a future critic. Early childhood showed signs of the seeds of moral virtue in his fish sermon when only five years old. He was three when he caught his first fish, which he described in his essay, Christopher in His Sporting Jacket. When scarcely much older he had delivered a sermon in the nursery to his brothers and sisters on the contrast between good and bad parents; 'There was a fish, and it was a de'il o' a fish, and it was ill to its young anes.'¹⁵ Even at this early age, Wilson showed moral sensibility and a piety, in which he had been brought up, which was later to develop into a nature highly susceptible and sympathetic towards grief and joy in every form, a sensitivity towards the needs of others, and a strong moral sense of integrity and justice.

Education and schooling followed, first with Mr. James Peddie, an English teacher in Paisley, with whom he stayed for a year or two. He developed a love of learning from his teacher, who was a good man, and Wilson was motivated by a desire to please him. The family presently moved to the manse of the neighbouring parish of Mearns, where Wilson was taught by the Rev. George M'Latchie for whom he had a filial regard. He admired the countryside and described it in the Recreations as the 'wild, moorland, sylvan, pastoral parish of Mearns'.¹⁶ In school Wilson was 'every inch the scholar',¹⁷ as Mrs Gordon noted in her Memoir. He left when he was twelve, having been influenced by the energy, activity, and vivacity of the Rev. M'Latchie's character.

In 1797 Wilson's father died, and Wilson displayed the emotional susceptibility that was to characterise him when he fainted at the funeral. He continued his studies at Glasgow College, and entered the Latin class for the session 1797-98. It was here that he came under the influence of two teachers, Professor Jardine, Professor of Logic, who was not only a

teacher to him but a private mentor and friend. Students spoke affectionately of him as a kind of 'intellectual father'¹⁸, and Wilson lived with his family as a student. The second was Professor Young, Professor of Greek whom Wilson mentioned in his Recreations as a lachrymose figure with a passionate love of Greek. He moulded the taste and perception of the good and beautiful, and encouraged Wilson to cultivate a literary taste. He developed the accomplishments of music, and was a devoted lover of music, vocal and instrumental, and also showed an early interest in poetry and started writing verses. He made friendships, especially two that were to have a life-long effect on him, Alexander Blair and Robert Findlay. Alexander Blair was an Englishman, despite his name, and together they discussed poetry, including the Lyrical Ballads and poetry of the little-known poet Wordsworth, and Wilson dedicated some of his early poems to Blair. In 1803 Wilson finished his studies at Glasgow, and graduated on 16th May and left for Oxford.

In December 1803 Wilson was entered as a gentleman-commoner at Magdalen College, aged nineteen years. He now acquired a fortune of fifty thousand pounds from his father. The president of his college was Dr Routh, and Wilson came under his influence. He developed as an individual, taking long solitary walks, and also developed his considerable prowess in physical sports, and his conversational powers. Part of his enjoyment was a study of human nature which he observed through his cultivation of the friendships of a wide selection of different classes. He won the Newdigate prize for fifty lines of English verse, and had an early romance with Margaret Dychmont, whom he called the Orphan Maid. In 1807 he sat for his examination of B.A. He graduated as a first class honours man, having undertaken a 'brilliant examination'.¹⁹ and been praised by his examiners. He set out for the life of a squire in his newly acquired estate of Elleray, in Windermere, which he had purchased while still at Oxford. He was encouraged by the beautiful scenery and the nearness of the company and friendship of the Lake poets; the society of Coleridge and his son Hartley, of Southey, of Wordsworth, and De Quincey, all of whom lived within a distance of twenty miles. He met his future bride, Miss Jane Penny, whom he subsequently married in May 1811. He was still writing poetry, including a romantic poem entitled the Isle of Palms, which he dedicated to his teachers at Glasgow college, Professors Jardine and Young. The

poem appeared in a collection published on 20th February, 1812. Wilson was disappointed by the initial response, but was praised for the Isle of Palms by Francis Jeffrey in his Edinburgh Review. He decided to read for the Bar, encouraged by his mother, and passed his Civil Law Trials. He met the acquaintance of James Hogg, who was brought into contact with the literary men of Edinburgh through the publication of his edition of the Queen's Wake in 1814. Then in 1815 came the calamity which changed his life by changing his circumstances, the loss of the greater part of his fortune due to the mis-management of a relative. Wilson left Ellera with his wife and young family, and moved to Edinburgh to seek refuge in his mother's house in Queen Street. He came here determined to pass Advocate and take his position in Edinburgh society while supporting his family by working at the Scottish Bar. Edinburgh, at this time, was ruled over by two eminent lawyers, Walter Scott and Francis Jeffrey. Wilson was drawn into the literary circle of that time: he socialised with the blue stocking, Mrs Grant, advocates Sir Patrick Tytler, Thomas Maitland, future Solicitor General, Sir William Hamilton, the philosopher and metaphysician; Wilson's own friends, Patrick Robertson and John Gibson Lockhart, and the Edinburgh-born William Blackwood; and the painters, Sir Henry Raeburn, Sir David Wilkie, Alexander Nasmyth, and Admiral Watson, among whose sons was the portrait painter who became Sir John Gordon Watson. The requisites necessary for a future critic were already present, namely, a literary culture and good education and a wide sympathy for human nature, to enable him to make the sound judgements appropriate to a cultivated and educated person. According to Matthew Arnold, a critic should have assimilated 'lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a 'touch stone' to other poetry'²⁰. Wilson was not successful as a lawyer and his friendship and praise for his poetry by Francis Jeffrey encouraged him to contribute to the Edinburgh Review. Soon after, 1817 saw the rise of BM, with whom he began a life-long association, then his appointment in 1820 to the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, until his death after a stroke on 3rd April 1854. He was buried in the Dean cemetery, with an imposing public funeral on 7th April and a statue of him by John Steel was erected in Princes Street in 1865.

b. Edinburgh and Blackwood's Magazine: (1817-1856)

At the time that he wrote, periodical criticism in general and critics were out of favour; both Coleridge and Wordsworth had suffered from their treatment by Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, and Wilson aimed to revive the position of periodical literature. Wilson was never the editor of BM but as its 'Intellectual Atlas'²¹ he supported and contributed to it from its inception in 1817 until his death in 1854. His powerful intellect found it an ideal venue for expressing his philosophy on life and writing about what he knew best - literature, nature, art, sport, manners and society, and human nature. He had already realised that poetry was not his natural metier; when he attempted to soar into the regions of poetical invention he failed, but when he descended into a lower element his talents raised him above the mass. He did not weary the public with his own feeble performance, but discovered and encouraged literary excellence in others. The BM contains a style which is rhapsodical, extravagant, farcical and riotous - but shows unity of purpose, a poetic truthfulness and a discrimination. Throughout his writings there is the feeling of enjoyment and happiness in life which was the key to his own nature and temperament. As an essayist and classicist, Wilson was dismissive of journalism, calling it mere 'porter's work', but the genre suited his mercurial nature, and he admitted that he loved to work 'in fits and starts'.²² He acquired a ledger, in which he assimilated topics of interest, and his method was to draw from this when an article was required. He output was prolific, and he exhibited a power of production and a variety of subjects to which possibly no parallel can be found. Mrs Gordon attributes him to 300 articles, or 6,178 pages of BM after 1826, but allowing for another 100 as the probable figure for the eight years preceding 1826, when he collaborated with other contributors, there is a total of 8,234 pages. Making allowances for his duties as a Professor for half the year, this was, by any standards, a remarkable achievement. It entitled him to respect as a man, who, though a poet, was no dreamer, and though passionately fond of physical recreation, never ceased to earn his livelihood by his sheer capacity for hard work.

Although there is very little written by him about literary criticism and the literary critic, Wilson states his fundamental task in his usual rhapsodical style which was to instruct the young towards a sense of beauty by training the inner eye and therefore 'awakening

people to the beauties of Art and Nature',²³ that is, educating good, or right, taste in readers' minds, which led to a sense of enjoyment and pleasure. His object was to diffuse knowledge; in an essay the Education of the People, written in January 1830, he writes, '-- we believe that knowledge is good for the human soul; and we desire, we who may be somewhat or far higher in society, we who may have some great influence, power, and deliberation for others, to diffuse Good.'²⁴ Also, in November, 1830, in Noctes Ambrosianae No. twenty six, he commented, 'I am not dead to the voice of fame, - but, believe me, that my chief, if not sole object in writing for *Maga*, is the diffusion of knowledge, virtue, and happiness all over the world'.²⁵ -- 'I believe that all my words are not wasted each succeeding month, on the idle air -- They may have touched a string, a chord -- in some innocent, simple, but not unthoughtful heart; and that string, that chord -- may thenceforth of itself "warble melody", while, if untouched by me or you, or other lovers of their kind, it might have lain mute for ever! If so, verily I have had my reward.'²⁶

The adverse circumstances that led to his joining the BM, along with Lockhart and James Hogg, namely the loss of his personal fortune due to the mis-management of his personal affairs by a relative, and the necessity to earn his living as a journalist, can indicate the various stages of his literary career. BM, or 'The *Maga*', was started in April 1817 as the Edinburgh Monthly Magazine by William Blackwood as a Tory rival to the Whig *Edinburgh Review*. It continued in October as BM until December 1905; from January 1906 it became Blackwood's Magazine. Lord Cockburn wrote of the year, 1817-18, 'There was a natural demand for libel at this time'.²⁷ Politics dictated the flavour of reviews, and Blackwood frequently had to pay damages in libels incurred by published articles. The BM, with its fondness for attacking personalities, soon earned a reputation as a disreputable periodical; Wordsworth refused to have a copy in his house, while another critic noted that at one end of periodical criticism there was the Gentleman's Magazine, while at the other was BM. S.T. Coleridge defended it,

--In the long, never-flagging Height and Sustainedness of irony, in the continuity, variety, and strength of wing, and in the value, the worth, the deep importance of the moral and political truths which it has streamed forth with eloquent wisdom,

"Blackwood's Magazine" is an unprecedented Phenomenon in the world of letters, and forms the golden - alas! the only - remaining link between the Periodical Press and the enduring literature of Great Britain.²⁸

It was the fashion to write under pseudonyms, and Professor Ralph Wardle noted, 'the members of the Blackwood circle gloried in anonymity and sometimes deliberately imitated the style of a colleague in order to conceal the true authorship of a paper.'²⁹ Wilson's first contributions were signed H; H.M.; the Old Batchelor; Z; and C.N. 'Christopher North' was initially used by various contributors, until it came to be accepted as Wilson's exclusively. Wilson wrote to his friend, the Rev. John Fleming, of Rayrigg, Bowness, on 14th March, 1828, 'Of BM I am not the Editor, although I believe I very generally get both the credit and discredit of being Christopher North. I am one of the chief writers, perhaps the chief, and have all along been so, but never received one shilling from the proprietor except for my own compositions.'³⁰ He was involved in the three articles that opened the BM and gave it notoriety, namely a fierce personal attack on Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, and a condemnation with Lockhart on the Cockney School of Poetry, principally aimed at Leigh Hunt, Keats and Hazlitt. As a satirist, he was the 'Beautiful Leopard'³¹ of the Chaldee Manuscript, a Biblical allegory which attacked Edinburgh figures and Whiggish domination, but after Lockhart left the BM in 1825, to become editor of the Quarterly Review, the tone and style gradually became more mellow as Wilson realised that fierce personal attacks do not correct men's taste or improve their morals. He endeavoured to explain his attitude in 1826, with the observation that:

----- before we appeared, the art of criticism was indeed in a truly miserable concern. The critic looked upon the poet as his prey. The two were always at daggers-drawing. The insolence of reviewers had reached its acme, and absolutely stunk in the nostrils of the public. --- we put an end to this in six months. --- Authors felt they were appreciated, and readers were delighted to have their own uncorrupted feelings authorised and sanctioned.³²

Wilson's attacks were less fierce than those of Lockhart, the 'Scorpion which delighteth to sting the faces of men.'³³ He fought with his fist, while Lockhart used a javelin and was the more cruel of the two.

The different art forms used by Wilson in BM to shape the stages of his literary career show him using literature as an artistic expression, an outlook of his ethical and metaphysical doctrine, and a view of man's place in the universe. The Noctes, written between 1819 and 1835, are a series of dialogues written in a spirit verging on the burlesque and farce yet blended with profound philosophy. Wilson described them as 'most entertaining and popular dialogues.'³⁴ Then the Recreations, where there is a more gentle feeling, and the vein of humour is separated from the earlier boisterous connotations and merged with the tender idealising beauty which was the strongest characteristic of Wilson's poetic mind. Finally, the Diēs Boreales, again a series of narratives but written in a more reflective and sombre tone, containing profound philosophy yet still infused with a graceful humour. Apart from the rhapsodical style which he uses in the Noctes and the Recreations, Wilson shows he is not only a poetical rhapsodist with a series of papers on Political Economy written between 1830 and 1833: his papers on Sadler's 'Balance of Food', on the Factory System, on the 'Poor Laws and Ireland', and on 'Definitions of Wealth'. Social problems are considered, as evidenced by an article, in 1830, 'On the Education of the People', also another on 'The Punishment of Death', containing an admirable and philosophical argument against capital punishment. Further evidence of his common-sense and capacity to deal with logic is shown in the series of eight papers entitled 'The Metaphysician', which was his sole contribution to philosophy. In a clear and elementary style he discusses some of the main points at issue between the (Commonsense) Scottish School of Philosophy and its opponents, as represented by Hume and Thomas Browne.

The earliest Noctes comprised seventy one numbers and were the combined result of various contributors, but from 1825-1835 they were almost entirely Wilson's. The principal characters were idealised and taken from personages in real life. 'Christopher North' was

Wilson himself, the colourful and flamboyant persona who became an extension of Wilson's personality; the Ettrick Shepherd was a vague resemblance to the gifted James Hogg; Timothy Tickler was a prototype of Robert Sym, born 1750 and died 1844, an uncle to Wilson on his mother's side and senior to Wilson by thirty five years; the 'Opium Eater' was De Quincey. The Shepherd, in particular, was Wilson's medium for expressing his own philosophy, and views on art and life. While a student at Oxford and Glasgow he had first studied human nature, and as a moralist he drew an analogy between ethics and beauty. A virtuous character is developed by moral actions and deeds, and therefore an active life was necessary to encourage virtue. The chief end of man was 'to fear God and keep his commandments.'³⁵ His concern was with 'the form of Truth', and he notes, 'Our business is not to hunt error out of the world but to invite and induce truth.'³⁶ Wilson introduces metaphysical concepts within a romantic framework. Truth is not an objective structure, independent of self, but is itself created by the individual, from within. Wilson believed it developed gradually, and, as he noted in the *Noctes* for 1831, it is a progress which requires patience and restraint: 'Let us aid the progress, if possible, as ways open to us; but not imagine that the turn of *our* hand will transform the universe.'³⁷ In an early article in BM, 1818, widely believed to have been written by Wilson, he commented on truth:

But what does it mean, to seek truth within ourselves? What truth? Why, that truth which all men seek; that truth, the understanding of which is wisdom and which, blended in our lives, is peace, and liberty and power. Let each man understand for himself. He should know his own need. He remembers little of the past, if he has not to tell that he has often felt a fearful void in life, - an oppressive existence of inexplicable evils, - a capacity within himself of good that was not to be found, - desires and wants of something that reality should give, and does not give. He seeks therefore for something which is to satisfy his understanding and fill his heart, - which shall make steadfast his unstable life, - bind together his inconsistent purposes, - give clearness to all the relations of life, - harmony to all the movements of his mind, - unity to his being; that truth which shall be his friend, his monitor,

speaking to him at every moment of life - counselling him to do and to leave undone.³⁸

Free-will provides a moral choice between good and evil, and Wilson believed that the pursuit of sport developed an awareness of a moral sense through the obedience to laws of fair play and justice. The philosophy is mixed with humour, such as the description of the Shepherd blowing soap bubbles, visiting the theatre, and riding the Bonassus, a wild creature he had bought from a man at a show. The impression is of a kaleidoscope of culture in the widest sense: of changing images, of movement and art in motion, off-set with metaphysical discussions on the soul, the intellect, and the meaning of life.

What applied to moral beauty applied equally to the beauty of nature, and Wilson was a passionate lover of nature. He grew up surrounded by an environment of natural beauty, and later purchased the property of Elleray in the beautiful Lake District. Although obliged by circumstances, in due course, to live in Edinburgh, he made frequent solitary walking and fishing expeditions in the highlands, writing enthusiastic letters to his wife describing the scenery. Once, he persuaded his wife to accompany him on a walking tour through Scotland; as Wilson told Hogg later, 'they had walked three hundred and fifty miles in the Highlands, between 5th of July and 25th of August, "sojourning in divers glens from Sabbath unto Sabbath, fishing, eating, and staring"'.³⁹

Wilson used the medium of the Shepherd in the Noctes to show his own response to the beautiful in nature, and wrote of his own idyllic landscape of childhood in several essays in the Recreations under the persona of Christopher North. He also points out the beauty of Scottish landscapes and the Lakes of Windermere and Cumberland; he includes useful information about the merits of certain inns, the state of various roads and distances between relevant positions. His response is seen on two levels, (a) spiritual and (b) sensuous; to understand the delights one must be receptive and have a mind in harmony with the spirit of nature, and see the power of the Deity behind all creation. The two main conceptions in his thought of God in Nature were as (a) the almighty Creator and (b) the ever active Ruler. He

saw in Nature no God Himself, but God's hand; his invocations to Nature, animate and inanimate to praise God in one general song of adoration, were but highly emotional and figurative statements of the conception that God is not all, but Lord of all God is the Universal Soul of Heaven and Earth. He is the essential Presence in all nature, and with this philosophy Wilson typifies the romantic view, which is also a conservative one, that the spirit is the ultimate in Nature as it is in Art. He appealed to the imagination and not merely to the understanding. It was not form but colour that appealed to his intensely visual character, and the general impression conveyed in his descriptions is of a rich and varied colouring. There were two aspects of this: (a) no discrimination of shades or tints - broad masses of sweeping colour, strong and clear, seen particularly in his Recreations (b) he used words of description which indicate colour in general without actual specification as to kind, designed to affect the readers' memory, such as 'flushing' and 'hues'. Motion attracted more than form, dancing lights and shades, waving branches and the flow of water, and he received more through his eye than through his ear. As Wilson remarked, 'Does that man exist who is not in some degree the slave of the senses'.⁴⁰

Look but at those dozen downward showers, all denizens of heaven, how black, and blue, and bright they in their glee are streaming, and gleaming athwart the sunny mountain-gloom, while ever as they descend on earth, lift up the streams along the wilderness louder and louder a choral song. Look now at the heather-and smile whenever henceforth you hear people talk of purple. You have been wont to call a gold guinea or a sovereign yellow-but if you have got one in your pocket, place it on your palm, and in the light of that broom is it not a dirty brown? You have an emerald ring on your finger-but how grey it looks beside the green of those brackens, that pasture, that wood! Purple, yellow, and green, you have now seen, sir, for the first time in your life.⁴¹

He was aware of the hum of the bees, noting, 'The bee-murmur above our heads might now almost be called thunder.'⁴² Elsewhere, he comments, '---like a bee, that in many musical gyrations goes humming round men's heads and tree-tops, aimlessly curious in his joy, yet

knowing instinctively the straight line that intersects all those airy circles, leading to and fro between his hive in the garden and the honey dew on the heather hills⁴³; the bleating of the sheep, the songs of the birds, the neighing of horses, and the sounds heard in storms, such as summer thunderstorms. He comments,

Dear the thunder of the cataract heard, when the sky is without a cloud, and the rain is over and gone - heard by the deer stalker, standing like a shadow, leagues off, or moving for hours slow as a shadow, guided by the antlers. Dear be the yell of the unseen eagle in the sky, and dear, where "no falcon is abroad for prey," the happy moaning of the cushat in the grove-the lilt of the lintwhite among broom and brier-the rustle of the wing of the lonesome Robin-redbreast in the summer woods-his sweet pipe on the barn or byre-riggin' in autumn, through all winter long his peck at the casement, and his dark-eyed hopping round the hearth! Be thine ever a native, not an alien spirit, and ever on thy lips, sweet Scotia! may there hang the music of thy own Doric tongue.⁴⁴

The most frequent sounds were those which came from actual observation, such as water, which was his favourite element, and he described it as 'the pure Element',⁴⁵ 'And now we are brought to speak of the Highland Rivers, Streams, and Torrents; but we shall let them rush or flow, murmur or thunder in your own ears, for you cannot fail to imagine what the waters must be in a land of such glens and such mountains.'⁴⁶ A summer drought was an occasion when,

--Many a dancing hill-stream was dead-only here and there one stronger than her sisters attempted a *pas-seul* over the shelving rocks; but all choral movements and melodies forsook the mountains, still and silent as so much painted canvass. Waterfalls first tamed their thunder, then listened, alarmed to their own echoes, wailed themselves away into diminutive murmurs, gasped for life, died, and were buried at the feet of the green slippery precipices. Tarns sank into moors; and there was the voice of weeping heard and low lament among the water-lilies.⁴⁷

Then the ending of the drought,

But the windows of the heaven were opened, - and like giants refreshed with mountain-dew, the rivers flung themselves over the cliffs with roar of thunder. The autumnal woods are fresher than those of summer. The mild harvest-moon will yet repair the evil done by the outrageous sun; and, in the gracious after-growth, the green earth far and wide rejoices as in spring. Like people that have hidden themselves in caves when their native land was oppressed, out gush the torrents, and descend with songs to the plain. The hill-country is itself again when it hears the voices of the streams.---⁴⁸

The particular smells of nature of flowers had a charm; as Wilson comments, 'How fragrant'. 'For the Irt has banks of broom, as well as of birches; people can have no noses who say wild-flowers have no scent; and sweet is the breath of cows.'⁴⁹

Although Wilson loved the softer, gentler, side of Nature, it was the wild tumultuous elements of thunder, water, wind, storms, and mountains that especially appealed and stimulated his readers to develop an aesthetic sense of the sublime, and he commented, 'In no other country does nature exhibit herself in more various forms of beauty and sublimity, than in the North of England and the Highlands of Scotland'.⁵⁰ He believed that 'the love of nature is strong in the hearts of the inhabitants of our Island'⁵¹, but much depended on the character of the walker; it required 'a cultivated mind and a heart open to the influences of Nature'.⁵² Also, he must know what it is like to commune with one's own thoughts, and to love not only his own society but also the society of any other human being; he must rejoice in all forms and shows of life. It followed therefore, '-- No man, however well read, should travel by book. --- 'Travel in the faith, that go where you will, the cravings of your heart will be satisfied, and you will find it so, if you be a true lover of nature. ---'⁵³

It is in this spirit that one becomes familiar with elements of the sublime, such as mountains, and it is the physical act of standing and looking upwards to observe the mountains, that heightens the impression of grandeur and power. Wilson relates mind with power, and notes, 'All minds under any excitation, more or less personify mountains'.⁵⁴ He describes Cruachan and Loch Awe

--- Pleasant are his many hills, and magnificent his one mountain. For you see but Cruachan. He is the master-spirit. Call him the noblest of Scotland's Kings. His subjects are princes; and gloriously they range round him, stretching high, wide, and far away yet all owing visible allegiance to him, their sole and undisputed sovereign. The setting and the rising sun do him homage. Peace loves-as now-to dwell within his shadow; but high among the precipices are the halls of the storms.--
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Similarly, water is another sublime image, and waterfalls particularly appeal. Clouds, too, with their sense of mystery and wonder, are also considered, and thunderstorms. The shepherd, in the *Noctes*, speaks rapturously of a 'cloud-cathedral':⁵⁶

A congregation of a million might worship in that Cathedral! What a dome! And is not that flight of steps magnificent? My imagination sees a crowd of white-robed spirits ascending to the inner shrine of the temple. Hark - a bell tolls! Yonder it is, swinging to and fro, half-minute time, in its tower of clouds. The great air-organ begins to blow its pealing anthem - and the overcharged spirit falling from its vision, sees nothing but the pageantry of earth's common vapours - that ere long will melt in showers, or be wafted away in darker masses over the distance of the sea.⁵⁷

In contrast to the free and open images of grandeur, Wilson uses the image of the tide as an example of ordered power, believing that 'there is no nobler image of ordered power'.⁵⁸ Wilson had admiration, too, for the English landscape, '--- England, its downs, its wolds, its meadows, its plains, its vales, its hills, its mountains, minsters, abbeys, cathedrals, castles, palaces, villages, towns and cities all became tributary to our imagination, gazing upon her glories with a thousand eyes. ---'.⁵⁹ The spatial sense of landscape and the panoramic effects shows a feeling for the picturesque, although a tendency for exaggeration, which was paralleled in his descriptive prose. He lavishes poetic images and uses superlatives, but had the power to paint word pictures, which evoked an image in the reader's mind and appealed

to his memory; an example is the description by the Shepherd of Elleray, Wilson's property in Windermere:

a house on a gentle eminence, commanding a beautifu' bend o' the blue braided sky oberhead, hills and mountains piling themselves in regular gradation up, up, - and far, far, far aff and awa, till you kenna whilk the rosy clouds - and, beyond a foreground o' woods, groves, halls, and cottages, exquisitely interspersed wi' fields and meadows, which, in the dimmest days, still seem spots of sunshine - a loch! or, supposin the scene in England, a lake, a day's journey round about, always blue or bright, or, if ony time black, yet then streaked gloriously wi' bars o' sunburst, sae that in the midst o' the foamy gloom o' Purgatory are seen serenely rising the Isles o' Paradise.⁶⁰

Sympathetic to the sense of space, is the romantic concept of solitude, and its association with the sublime. As Wilson noted,

"For solitude is sometimes best society, and a short absence urges sweet return!"⁶¹

Throughout Wilson's descriptions, there is a use of geographical romance or heightening of poetic effect by the accumulation of sounding geographical names, such as in lines descriptive of thunder re-echoed across the mountains. The impression of sublimity is due to the suggestion of mysterious elemental forces associated with such names as Coniston. This mental following of the thunder from peak to peak, the delight in tracing the progress of any storm in summer or winter, the endeavour to strengthen the impression by the use of the remote and unknown, show a mind set towards romantic rather than classical ideals.

As a nature lover, Wilson had an intimate knowledge of natural history which he acquired from early childhood and from his brother, James, who was a keen naturalist, a knowledge which could not be gained from books. He looked on the study of natural life as a moral duty. He loved all animals, including dogs which he credited with their own sense of

beauty, but birds were his special love, which he called, 'those most interesting and admirable creatures'.⁶² As a keen ornithologist he once kept sixty two birds as pets at his own home. He praised the authors of current books published on birds, including 'the Birds of Bewick, and White, and the two Wilsons, and Montague, and Mudie, and Knapp, and Selby, and Swainson, and Audabon, and many others ---'.⁶³ The lark was his particular favourite, the 'lyrical poet of the sky. --- Of all birds to whom is given dominion over the air, the Lark alone lets loose the power that is in his wings only for the expression of love and gratitude'.⁶⁴ He describes the habits of various birds, such as their choice of nesting places: the Grey Lintie, 'the darling bird of Scotland',⁶⁵ often chooses to nest in the most solitary places. The difference between the early rising of the thrush compared to that of the blackbird is noted; also that 'all our great poets have loved the *minnesingers* of the woods - Thomson, and Cowper, and Wordsworth, as dearly as Spenser, and Shakespeare, and Milton'.⁶⁶ Similarly, he considers birds of prey and notes their particular habits and methods of attack: 'the eagles, kites, and hawks, hunt by day. The Owl is the Nimrod of the Night'.⁶⁷ Regarding eagles in Scotland, Wilson notes:

Exclusive of the true Osprey (*Falco Haliaetus*), which is rather a larger fishing-hawk than an eagle there are two kinds - the Golden Eagle (*F. Chrysaetos*) and the White-Tailed or Cinerous Eagle (*F. Albicilla*). The Ring-Tailed Eagle (*F. Fulvus*) is the young of the Golden Eagle, being distinguished in early life by having the basal and central portion of the tail white, which colour disappears as the bird attains the adult state.⁶⁸

The Black Eagle, which is found in the Highlands, is the name by which the Ring-Tailed Eagle and the Golden Eagle is referred. Wilson described owls as 'cats with wings'.⁶⁹ The loveliest of all owls, Wilson feels, is the Snowy Owl, which is found around the Arctic Circle, on the shores of Hudson's Bay, in Norway, Sweden, and Lapland. In an essay, 'A Glance over Selby's Ornithology', written in 1826, and his review of Audobon's Biography, in July and August, 1831, Wilson showed further evidence of his scientific knowledge of

ornithology. Among other animals, such as lions, cattle, and hens, he reveals in his writings a similar knowledge and expertise of their particular habits and life styles.

From animals, Wilson turned to study the different characters found amongst the 'lovely tribe of trees'.⁷⁰ He comments on various trees, using poetic images which particularly appeal to form and therefore suggest a picture in the readers' imagination: 'the Alder's rounded softness, the spiral Larch -- the Birch's pendent beauty -- the darker grove of columnar Lombardy Poplars -- a Horse Chestnut has a grand oriental air, and like a satrap uplifts his green banner yellowing in the light -- Elms -- hang over head in heaven like the chancel of a cathedral -- yonder stands an Ash-grove like a forest of ships with bare poles in the docks of Liverpool'.⁷¹ Wilson feels that the finest trees are found in England. An English forest could not be imagined in Scotland, although Scotland did have forests of a different character and grandeur. Wilson felt that the Rev. W. Gilpin's book, Forest Scenery, should 'now be in the hands of every one who cares about the woods';⁷² he reviewed it favourably and said that Gilpin had 'understood it well'.⁷³ The Pine was the dominating tree of the Highlands, and Wilson criticised people who described its colour as 'murky'.⁷⁴ He adopts the romantic concept of personalising trees: he compares himself with the qualities of the Ash tree, 'a manly tree', but "dreigh and dour".⁷⁵ He uses the metaphor of trees to describe the society in which he lived, "yet we have lived, all our lives, in the best sylvan society - we have the entree of the squires of the Pines, the Elms, the Ashes, and the Oaks, the oldest and highest families in Britain".⁷⁶

There are many advantages in studying the beautiful in Nature, according to Wilson; he advised readers to 'let your hearts be open and free to all genial impulses about to be breathed into them from the beautiful and sublime in nature',⁷⁷ and in this spirit it provided an opportunity to bring all people together, 'One touch of nature makes the world kin'⁷⁸, as everyone has some awareness of the sense of beauty. It brought a sense of calm and peace, and the knowledge of a Higher Presence. It elevated the senses and instructed the eye by training people to observe the colours of the surrounding countryside, and to listen to the sounds of nature. It made people consider their place in the universe: 'Were we framed merely that we might for a few years rejoice in the beauty of the stars, as in that of the

flowers beneath our feet? --- But the heavens are not an idle show, hung out for the gaze of that idle dreamer man. They are the work of the Eternal God, and he has given power therein to read and to understand His glory ---.⁷⁹ Wilson distinguishes between power and knowledge:

As we travel through these orbs, we feel indeed that we have no power, but we feel that we have mighty knowledge. We can create nothing, but we can dimly understand all. It belongs to God only to create, but it is given to man to know - and that knowledge is itself an assurance of immortality ---.⁸⁰

Any person, Wilson believed, 'with discourse of reason',⁸¹ will be sensitive to the lessons learnt from Nature and comprehend its mystery and power, and its dependence on the presence of God: 'When the Religion of Nature leans in awe on the Religion of God'.⁸²

The theory of Nature as the absolute spiritual element underlay Wilson's concept of Art: Art was the 'hand-maid' of Nature;⁸³ it was complimentary to it, and Wilson refers to 'the united kingdom of Art and Nature',⁸⁴ based on the same principles of appealing through the senses to the imagination less than the understanding. In Art, beauty rises from the creator; it is subjective, not objective, as in Nature, and is the process by which the beautiful is reproduced. It is a reproduction of an 'idea' of the reality which is the subject of the presentation, that is, it is an idealised beauty. Both Nature and Art are concerned with life (reality), and their primary aim is to express a natural beauty (physical and moral) by appealing directly to the source of emotion, the feelings, and both give aesthetic pleasure. Wilson's aesthetic, his theory of Art, was a romantic notion, that is, art was an expression of emotion, (form), and communicated the feelings of the artist which were stimulated by feelings aroused by the object, and these corresponded to similar feelings in the reader. There was an organised unity with subject and object, unlike Nature which was chaotic and open-ended. The relation of nature and art to contemporary poetry was discussed by Wilson in the twenty-second Noctes on the celebrated dispute between Bowles and Campbell concerning Pope. North argues for the central importance of nature: 'I agree with Bowles, that Nature is all in all for the purposes of poetry - Art stark naught.'⁸⁵ Tickler disagrees,

maintaining that the function of art is always present in the landscape and in the production of poetry. North accepts the point: 'Is a log of wood, be it a whole up-rooted pine, drifting on the ocean, as poetical as a hundred-oared canoe? What more sublime than the anchor by which a great ship hangs in safety within roar of the whirlpool? Than the plummet that speaks of the rock-foundations of the eternal sea?'⁸⁶

It was the process by which the artist made an object, a thought, or an action beautiful and realised it in an outward form, that was considered by the critic. The artist idealised his subject, and by training the senses of the eye and the ear to look and listen, Wilson was educating his readers to obtain an aesthetic experience through the imagination. It was as a poetical critic in the BM that he showed his true ability, and the consideration of his critical theory from which he made his judgements is the subject of the next section.

Part C : Critical Theory

CHAPTER THREE

Critical Theory

Introduction

This section examines the critical principles upon which Wilson based his judgements. The essence of a critic is the judgements that he makes, but equally important is the theory of literary criticism from which he makes his judgements. It involves applying a set of values to a literary work and judging the work as it relates to them. As a literary critic Wilson follows the romantic tradition which he had inherited, in contrast to the neoclassical tradition derived from Plato and Aristotle, through Horace, Dryden, and Samuel Johnson. Central to the romantic tradition was the interest in the self and the individual, and the working of the mind. Art was an expression of the artist's inner feelings, and was moral. Criticism relied on experience and reason, and imagination was a way of seeing reality. It entered into the aesthetic and into ethics. Critics differed in the way they interpreted the imagination. Wilson shows a blend of both the romantic and the neoclassical concepts: he belonged to the Scottish Commonsense School of reason, yet was a romantic as he attached importance to the feelings which were central to the imagination. Feelings were at the heart of his thesis because, in his view, feeling was a part of life and led to pleasure and happiness.

The first part of this section is an analysis of the imagination; the second part describes the working of the imagination in the unconscious; the third part is concerned with the way the imagination relates to the Fine Arts; the fourth part considers the distinction between fancy and imagination.

(a) Analysis of the Imagination

In order to have a clear conception of Wilson's purpose as a critic it is necessary to consider his other activities, not only his criticism, but also the general outlines of his philosophy and development of his mental outlook, which was influenced by his classical reading, including the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Homer, and also Kant, Shaftesbury and Alison. He was representative of a tendency that can be traced in other romantic critics who regard the imaginative principle as central to creativity. The romantic mind could reach the realm of the subjective and inner consciousness, especially the self-consciousness, by direct intuition or judgement. The faculty that does this is the imagination, which Wilson defined as 'Intellect working according to certain laws of feeling or passion'.¹ It is part of thought, along with reason and intellect, but with the particular power to shape and create, and stimulate feelings of delight or pleasure through the senses. Central to this romantic theory is sympathy, and a natural affinity with the object, which produces an inner harmony in the mind, contrary to the neo-classical theory where imagination is relegated to a narrower sphere, with the emphasis on reason and logic rather than the feelings and self-expression.

Wilson followed Shaftesbury in his belief that imagination entered into moral ethics; to follow nature was to follow good. The basis of Wilson's position is that imagination is a part of ethics and cannot be separated from theological concerns. He notes, '---All men feel that the foundations of Faith are laid in the dark depths of their being, and that all human happiness is mysteriously allied with pain and sorrow.---'² He defines imagination as an activity and useful as it gives delight and instructs people towards an awareness of an aesthetic sense of pleasure. He called the imagination, '--One of the elements of life itself; a strong principle of our nature living in the midst of our affections and passions, blending with, kindling, invigorating and exalting them all.'³ As a moralist and utilitarian he is concerned with its utility, but as a literary critic he is concerned with educating good, or right, taste in readers' minds, which leads to a sense of enjoyment and happiness. Wilson is basically reflecting the nineteenth-century romantic view of imagination, but with the emphasis on the moral effects which give happiness and are derived from life itself. Beauty

appealed to his romantic nature, but utility and reason reflected his interest as a moral philosopher concerned with truth and man as a moral being.

Wilson was well-equipped as a critic, possessing a love of knowledge for its own sake, a poetic imagination, and a classical scholarship. He was born and grew up in Scotland, aware of the scenic wild beauty of nature which stimulated his sensitive imagination. He noted that -

The minds of civilized men are too much unpoetical, because the natural play of sensitive imagination in their minds is, in early years, suppressed ... We begin in imagination, but we outgrow it. We pass into a state which is not of wisdom, but one in which imagination and natural passion are suppressed and extinct...⁴

This is reminiscent of Wordsworth's thinking, and also echoes Coleridge. Wilson wrote poetry, and while a student at Glasgow College, on 7th June 1801, he noted in his diary that he had begun 'an essay on the Faculty of the Imagination'⁵, which unfortunately no longer seems to be available. His own powerful imagination was encouraged by his appointment as a professional critic for BM in 1817, and subsequently his position as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh (1820-51), where he introduced the concept of the imagination into his lectures. An intimate friend, Alexander Blair, whose friendship Wilson first cultivated when a student at Glasgow University, provided the moral strength and support for Wilson throughout his academic career, including virtually writing his lectures for him. Blair himself held the Chair of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres at the recently established University College of London, but, as Elsie Swann recorded in her biography, Christopher North, (1934), '--- Most of his energy was expended in helping Wilson to maintain his status as an Edinburgh Professor of Moral Philosophy and Political Economy.'⁶ Writing to Alexander Blair, in November 1821, Wilson comments that his wife, Jane,

has copied out two of the Lectures on Imagination and I will contrive to get them sent in a day or two. They are inaccurately copied, I fear, and some parts in my handwriting are missed out, but you will do at them what you can. They do indeed (from imperfectness) need much, and I hope you will be able to improve these considerably. You will just tell when you send them any alterations, or

additions, and where they are to come in. Gerard has a great deal, good or bad, on Imagination⁷

A further letter, in 1823, urged Blair to 'confine yourself to Imagination till you hear from me again.'⁸ From 1824 Wilson altered the plan of his course, and now the Imagination was treated in nine 'most interesting' lectures, 'being resolved into the Faculty of Intellection, with certain Feelings, under the Law of Association; and here an enquiry is instituted into the sources of the Sublime and Beautiful, an attempt made to define Genius, and its province, and illustrations are given of the Philosophy of Taste.'⁹ Wilson used the imagination to illustrate moral truths to his students by embroidering his lectures with flights of fancy which presented images and pictures to their mind. His object was to stimulate their emotions by drawing on his own wide reading, especially of Shakespeare, for illustrations. He was, in effect, demonstrating how knowledge could be taught through the senses, a method which proved so successful and popular that his reputation encouraged visitors to come and listen, alongside his students, to his oratory. C. Laurie, in his book Scottish Philosophy, noted that 'His lectures were for the most part of a discursive character, appealing more to the imagination and the emotions than to the speculative intellect.'¹⁰ But Professor Veitch, a former pupil of Wilson, observed, 'some of his analyses were very remarkable, particularly that of Imagination,'¹¹ and he regretted these lectures were not published.

Wilson's remarks about criticism appeared in his article in BM for February 1845, North's Specimens of the British Critics, and suggested that the nineteenth century was an important one for literary criticism. He noted two phases of criticism, the first is the classical and describes the method which genius followed. It obeys rules, and rules 'grate upon the ear',¹² but since then 'we are turned philosophers'¹³ and the second phase has arisen. The principles - the facts or laws in our nature, and the nature of things about us, which have given out the rules are now involved. Criticism was founded as 'an art empirical'¹⁴ but now is concerned with the second phase, of 'a science grounding an art'.¹⁵ Wilson regarded the art of criticism and the art of poetry as largely one and the same; they mainly coincide, and

criticism was no more than 'the reasoned intelligence of poetry'¹⁶. The same spirit, power, precision, delicacy, and accomplishment of understanding, found in the soul of a great poet, were also found in that of a good critic judging. Wilson noted certain qualities he regarded necessary for a critic,

Knowledge of books, knowledge of men, knowledge of Nature - and solicited, and roused, and sharpened, in the manifold and studious conversation with books, and with men, and with Nature - last and greatest - the knowledge of thyself - shall bring thee out a large-hearted, high-minded, sensitive, apprehensive, comprehensive, informed and original, clear and profound, genial and exact, scrutinizing and pardoning candid, and generous, and just - in a word, a finished CRITIC.¹⁷

A poet was his own critic, but a critic was 'a poet without a creation'.¹⁸ A poet wrote by feeling, and a true critic judged by feeling. Criticism was 'a shape of self-intuition'¹⁹ and Wilson observed,

Criticism opens to us the poetry we possess, and like a magnanimous kindly protector, shelters and fosters all its springing growths. What is criticism as a science? Essentially this - FEELING KNOWN - that is, affections of the heart and imagination become understood subject-matter to the self-conscious intelligence. Must feeling perish because intelligence sounds its depths? Quite the reverse. Greatest minds are those in which, in and out of poetry, the understanding contemplates the will.'---²⁰

By a "Science" of criticism Wilson does not mean a criticism that would apply the rules of natural science. He uses the term "scientific" in the same sense of an evaluation, or an exercise of taste. Poetical knowledge awakens the whole being, mind, soul, and body of human experience. 'Poetry is the breadth and finer spirit of all knowledge'²¹, and as Coleridge affirms, 'the poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity.'²² The real purpose of criticism is not as it was in the eighteenth century concerned with the structure and diction in works of art. It transcends and includes these and is

concerned with the mystery and meaning of life itself and its inner truth. The new critics are now dealing with the questions, what is poetry? How is a poem formed? and who is a poet? It is these questions that Wilson attempts to answer. The nature of poetry is the theme of his criticism.

Wilson inherited from his philosophical predecessors, from Plato to Kant, much of his idealistic philosophy and aesthetic which provide the answers and set the standard of Wilson's poetic. He was associated with the Scottish School of Commonsense who mingled questions of facts with philosophy. Their aims were philosophical rather than psychological, and an attempt to establish principles of common sense or basic beliefs which might be accepted as elements of truth. They were dealing with the foundation of reality, and their interest lay in three objects of speculation: the human soul, the material world, and God. It is within this tradition that Wilson belonged when he described himself as a 'philosophical critic'²³ and he notes, 'but our very affections are philosophical; our sympathies have all their source in reason; and our admiration is always built on the foundation of truth.'²⁴ But he himself is not a metaphysician, as he pointed out, and he is not simply concerned with showing how ideas are produced in our mind. He is more concerned with logic, and ethics, and psychology as the chief subject matter of the mind, and he ignores their relations with metaphysics. An interest in the effects rather than causes, is indicative of the gradual shift from the rational as the source of knowledge towards an interest in man's emotions, or feelings.

Wilson began with the assumption that there were 'two great original powers that drive onwards the human spirit in quest of knowledge; the necessity of life, and the delight of the soul'.²⁵ In mind, Wilson argued, we find two distinct natures or orders of phenomena: 1. an intellectual nature. 2. a nature in which active will and the sensibility to pleasure and pain are found. Man has therefore an intellectual and a moral being. He distinguishes between the two faculties, by indicating that 'there are two principal ways ... in which every object can be considered - and two chief aspects under which they present themselves to us -

the philosophical and the poetical - as they *are* to reason, as they *seem* to imagination.²⁶ He continues,

we may consider all things, either as intellect without feeling tends to consider them, or intellect with feeling i.e. causatively and passionately. The great, the most earnestly-desiring inquiry that pure reason makes is of the cause of things. For this end it comes into the world. To intellect thus working, what it sees is nothing - for what it sees are sign only of what has preceded - and therefore, such speculation dissolves the fabric to construct it over again. It builds out of destruction. But intellect working by feeling i.e. imagination, does quite the reverse. What is, is everything to it. It beholds and loves. Imagination educes from its objects all the passion, all the delight that they are capable of yielding it. It desires, it cares for nothing more. Hence philosophy and poetry are at war with each other, but they are powers which may belong to the service of the same kingly mind. Imagination lives in the present - in the shewn - in the apparent ... From the whole, as it is presented, springs some mighty passion. Disturb the actual presentment and the passion is gone.²⁷

Man's mental tools are the reason and the understanding; reason or insight (which is the equivalent of the creative imagination to the romantics) is the power of intuition. It was what Wordsworth called 'reason in her most exalted mood'.²⁸ Wilson used the term in the sense that Wordsworth had adapted, as a kind of intuition and the intuitive faculty as a kind of reason but of a higher sense than common sense, and one which should control conduct in life as well as in the arts. Science, or reason, was 'True knowledge of mind and matter, as far as it is permitted to us to know truly anything of the world without and the world within us, congenial in their coexistence --'²⁹ Poetry and Science are therefore identical, that is, poetry is perfect through Science, and as Imagination is 'the highest kind of Intellect, so Poetry is the highest kind of Science'.³⁰ In Wilson's view, the imagination is always under the control of the reason, and he notes that, 'Reason is said to be one faculty, and Imagination another - but there cannot be a grosser mistake; they are one and indivisible'.³¹ Mind metamorphosed matter, as Wilson contested; it finds the materials from the senses in the world of reality, but

it reproduces these materials in a changed form. It takes the senses and binds them to moral affections and makes them a part of poetry. As Wilson points out in the Noctes, 'The roots of the Will are in the body - and the roots of Intellect in the Will'.³² He continues, 'See how the state of the affections - which are Will - nourish even imagination, and how imagination acts into the purely intellectual faculties - and what vivacity mere health and joy will give to the memory, who, you know, in the olden time was called the mother of the Muses'.³³

Imagination, therefore, idealises, and to describe the working of the Imagination is the same as describing the working of the mind. It provides the power or way of looking at nature and art in a changed form, that is, by idealisation. All Art, according to Wilson, is a revelation of the 'Fact' or the 'Soul' behind the world of external reality, and he noted that 'what philosophers foolishly call intuitions are really revelations'.³⁴ The purpose of art is to reveal the truth, through creativity, and poetry is a term for any medium which reveals truth. As Wilson states, '...for what is religion but a clear - often a sudden - insight, accompanied with emotion, into the dependence of all beauty and all glory on the divine mind?'³⁵

Wilson begins his investigation with a principle that suggests his critical approach will be purely psychological:

It is not at all necessary that we should understand fine poetry to feel and enjoy it, any more than fine music. That is to say, some sorts of fine poetry - the shadowy and the spiritual; where something glides before us ghostlike, "now in glimmer and now in gloom", and then away into some still place of trees and tombs. Yet the poet who composes it must weigh the force of every feeling word - in a balance true to a hair, for ever vibrating, and obedient to the touch of dawn or dew-drop. Think not that such process interrupts inspiration; it sustains and feeds it; for it becomes a habit of the heart and soul in all their musings and meditations; and thus is the language of poetry, though human, heavenly speech.-----³⁶

We are not to enquire into the nature of the beautiful; instead it is the state or imaginative mood of mind that sustains the poetic feelings that is important. The imagination was nourished by the affections, and it heightened the mind by what Wilson described as 'acting into the purely intellectual faculties',³⁷ and Wordsworth maintained as its ability to

'intellectualise and rationalise the emotions'.³⁸ The Intellect and emotions are, therefore, inseparable and work together, and it is the emotions that burn ideas into the mind. Feeling is the essence of the imagination, and Wilson asks,

What is Feeling? The susceptibility of pleasure and pain, in all affections of which the natural language, in their simplicity, is smiles or tears; and, above all, grief and pity for others, and every mode, movement of love. To that last - love - belongs the sense of beauty - rising out of it, sinking into it - dying when it dies - for then it is a mere perception, and no more - as a man, by causes that have chilled the glow within, may be made more insensible to the sun, seeing but a disc that he knows gives the day, and is the centre of the system.³⁹

He distinguishes between feelings and taste, which he regarded as subordinate to feelings:

What is Taste? Fine delicate, and true perception of all relations of thoughts, in which feeling is either predominant or essential to their existence. It is commensurate with Fancy and Imagination, and with Judgement when employed in those provinces of its empire where the sensibilities dwell. 'Tis a poor, low, sensual name, of a rich, high, spiritual power - and should be drummed out of the immortal Muses.⁴⁰

How we get knowledge is to know and how we know depends on our perception and conception of reality. It can come from wisdom and understanding, derived from empiricism and association. But there was another way of acquiring knowledge, by universality: 'A deep, broad, sympathy imbues sentiments and opinions. --- Men believe by sympathy; for what none has disputed, that is faith'.⁴¹ Wilson agreed it was an age of reason, but that it was also an age of imagination, and there was a second way where the mind was active, and demanded an active response. There were two bonds of knowledge, habit and the feeling we annexe to forms, and he was 'averse to all doctrines that dissolve feelings or habits'.⁴² He noted that 'we begin children and end spirits',⁴³ and the more one approached total devotion, the more one united high intellect and high feeling to stable and strong happiness. As our moral nature rests in God, so must our intellect. 'We cannot be happy - we cannot be moral -

we cannot know truth - except in him',⁴⁴ as Wilson observes. Wilson concluded that man was,

A Totality, the whole Being; arts for his body, science and morals for his soul.

Imagination - Poetry - seems to elapse --- to elude grasp --- between. It is neither the body nor the soul; but a light that plays about both.⁴⁵

The imagination is 'a mimic of reality - a play of mind borrowed from all real things - in itself unreal',⁴⁶ whose power, the power of Poetry, lies in its ability to consecrate the real, in a manner akin to but inferior to that of religion. Crucial in both the imaginative and religious processes is the sense of spontaneity which is freedom. This unity of intellect and feeling becomes a poetic principle and is what Coleridge described as 'a synthesis of highest reason - and vehementest impulse'.⁴⁷ The only point upon which critics agree is that the poetic mood, or mind, is a state of pleasure. "It is the pleasure of a truth",⁴⁸ says Aristotle; or Plato's argument that pleasure is separate from knowledge. "We may conclude, then, that all poetry, from Homer onwards, consists in representing a semblance of its subject, whatever it may be, including any kind of human excellence, with no grasp of reality."⁴⁹ The first problem, therefore, of criticism is to determine what is the pleasure in relation to poetry. But before this can be done it is necessary to determine the nature of pleasure itself.

Wilson refutes the suggestion that the theory of poetry is pleasure. 'Pleasure is no more the end of poetry, than it is the end of knowledge, or of virtue, or of religion, or of this world. The end of poetry is pleasure, delight, instruction, expansion, elevation, honour, glory, happiness, here and hereafter, or is nothing'.⁵⁰ Like Wordsworth, Wilson believed poetry had a purpose; it is to be loved because it 'embraces all we can experience'.⁵¹ The power of Poetry is to draw material from life, and to elevate it by the power of imagination to an outward form, 'So poetry consecrates -- and so -- but higher far - doth Religion'.⁵² 'Poetry melts into religion',⁵³ Wilson concluded. He distinguished between the pleasure experienced by the poet and the man of science. They represent different pursuits of knowledge; the knowledge of one is necessary for the continuation and existence of life, but the other is the delight of the soul, and it is this religious and prophetic concept that Wordsworth emphasised when he stated: 'Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; Poetry is the first and

last of all knowledge -- it is immortal as the heart of man.⁵⁴ It was the interpretation that encouraged other romantics to regard the imagination as knowledge itself.

For Wilson, pleasure is an element of beauty, and beauty is a form of delight which gives pleasure in poetry. It was a subjective concept, 'The feeling o' Pure Perfection - as in a drop o' dew, a diamond, or a tear'.⁵⁵ and Wilson quotes from Wordsworth, 'What art Thou, O BEAUTY! and what meaneth thy Bard, Wordsworth, the Divine, in saying, "Thou pitchest thy Tents before him?"'⁵⁶ He considers it both in an aesthetic sense and in a moral sense, noting that

'Beauty, the soul of Poetry, is indeed divine - but there is that which is diviner still - and that is DUTY.'⁵⁷

Flowers laugh before her on their beds,
And fragrance in her footing treads;
She doth preserve the stars from wrong,
And the eternal heavens through her are

fresh and strong.⁵⁸

He recognised two kinds of beauty - (a) elementary, one which seems least to require any cultivation of the mind or aid of thought, such as the beauty of a radiant day, or a soft, inexpressive face; (b) relative beauty or utility directed where the object of pleasure is for a purpose. Beauty = love = happiness = enjoyment, (pleasure). He makes the customary distinction between beauty and sublimity, and maintains they are twin-feelings, but the element of the first is pleasure and that of the second is Pain. He comments, 'As delight is the source of beauty, so pain and fear, and power, which subdues pain and fear, are the sources of sublimity'.⁵⁹ He commented on Burke's essay on the Sublime and Beautiful, where the first attempt was made to establish Terror as the source of the sublime, but considered that 'Soul, not size, equally in mountains and in men, is and inspires the true sublime'.⁶⁰ Ideas were the soul itself, and Wilson develops the theme in the twenty-fourth Noctes where the Opium Eater declares that the human soul 'is perpetually making all things external and circumstant a mirror to itself of itself'⁶¹, but this mirror reflects a desired

internal peace, so that in a Coleridgean perception the soul 'loves to look on what it loves, though it cannot possess it: - and hence the feeling of the soul, in contemplating such a calm, is not of simple repose, but desire stirs in it, as if it would fain blend itself more deeply with the quiet which it beholds'.⁶² He continues, by illustrating an example:

A very large - or very small animal becomes imaginative - as...an eagle, or a humming bird. In the first there is expansion - in the second contraction; but in both, a going of intellect out of the accustomed habit-fixed measure. There is an intellectual tendency from or out of; namely, from or out of ourselves, but ourselves peculiarly conditioned - namely, as we exist in the world. For if Ourselves were high and fair, sublime and spiritual, there would be something gained, perhaps, by going out of the I or Me. But we have accumulated a narrow, petty, deadly, earth-thickened self; and every departure from this may be gain.⁶³

The link between imaginative activity and the sense of the infinite is again demonstrated in Noctes Twelve, where North and the Shepherd are discussing Phillips's painting in the style of Martin, *The Paphian Bower*, and the Shepherd says:

--- for it's delightfu' for the imagination to sink awa into its ain dreams amang thae lang withdrawing glades, and outower the wood-taps, if sae ane feel inclined, to flee awa to yonder distant hills, and from their pinnacles to take a flight up to yon pavilion- clouds, and lay a body's sel doon at full length on the yielding saftness!⁶⁴

There were two classes of sublime objects: 'those which shake the soul and make it tremble in its strength, and those on the contemplation of which it feels itself elated and full of power'.⁶⁵ In the first, awe before the infinitude of the universe (as in the appreciation of softer kinds of beauty), the imagination 'seems most be withdrawn'.⁶⁶ In the other, which (as in North's reading of *King Lear*) involves 'a triumph of the Moral Sense over some sort of pain'.⁶⁷ He continues, 'as to beauty ... the most marked thing in it is the feeling of love towards the object made beautiful by that feeling of love. Love, if ye can, the sublime object which shivers and grinds to dust your earthly powers, and then you overspread Sublimity with Beauty - like a merciful smile breaking suddenly from the face of some dreadful giant'.⁶⁸

Pleasure is a genus and has to be qualified by an individual moral judgement. It is conditioned by virtue, and Wilson agrees with Alison, whose Essay had recently been published, that material objects can give no emotion of beauty except as some disposition of mind. 'We very soon become convinced, by divers reflections, that our first natural and inevitable idea is not strictly true, that the Beauty and the Sublimity are not so imbedded and inherent in the objects as they once appeared to be. We must give up more and more, and shall find no rest till we recognise that they are totally of the mind'.⁶⁹ By cultivation of the mind, one can aspire to a specific beauty, and taste can be refined until it gradually evolves into an aesthetic appreciation which is closely identified with nature and the Deity. The highest point of taste is the appreciation of natural scenery. He quotes Akenside's lines, "Mind, mind alone being "the living fountain"⁷⁰ of the beautiful. In an article in BM (January 1839) he writes of the theory 'that all beauty and sublimity in external Nature are but the reflections of mental qualities' as 'in a great measure true'⁷¹ but the real appeal of the theory lay its recognition of 'analogies between the object of the external world, and the attributes of our moral and intellectual being'.⁷²

Beauty is a form of delight which gives pleasure in Art and Nature. The Shepherd's love of nature is described in the *Noctes*, '-- And mayna the joy o' imagination, broodin open-eyed on its saft silent hills - ilka range in itsel like a ready-made dream - blend even wi' that o' conscience - till the sense o' beauty is felt to be almost ane wi' the sense o' duty, sae peacefu' is all around in nature -'.⁷³ Wilson seemed to be indebted to Kant, or what is more likely to Kantian ideas intellectually current regarding the imagination during the second half of the eighteenth century. This is seen in several ways: first, there is his emphasis on the mind as organic and creative, and in harmony with the world. Also, it had a moral dimension, and explored the effects of ideas on belief and action, and included strong religious overtones. The synthesizing and creative functions of the imagination are clearly shown in his discussion of the nature of dramatic unity. He contradicts Aristotle's view that unity can only be achieved by 'linking together the successive parts of the action, like a chain of causes and effects',⁷⁴ and claims instead that to Shakespeare 'whatever in nature had unity to his imagination, afforded subject-matter for a Tragedy'.⁷⁵ A second Kantian influence is

his use of empirical and associationist psychology, and, like Kant, his belief that ideas, principles, values, and truths, are built into the mind, and are not the exclusive result of experience. Thirdly, Kant influenced Wilson on the subject of what directs the imagination. Wilson maintained that its moral character was shaped by the will, and that it acted alongside. Kant divided the productive imagination into two stages, the first is a willfully productive capacity, which is aimed at a specific end; the other stage is not connected to a willed purpose. A fourth parallel with Kant is in Wilson's retention of the theory of productive and reproductive, and that it is a mediator between understanding and sense, was the doctrine of Kant. Wilson, however, makes imagination the interpreter between body and soul, in which function it could spiritualise the latter or sensualise the former. There was no inbetween extreme. This is reminiscent of Coleridge's transcendentalism, and also, like Coleridge and Schelling, Wilson believed that the double power of reproduction and production operates simultaneously within the mind of a genius. In an article on Hamlet in February 1818, Wilson asserted that 'Shakespeare's soul is like Intellect, descending into the world, and putting on human life, faculties, and sense, whereby to know the world'.⁷⁶ This is very similar to Schelling's theory,

Intelligence is productive in twofold wise, either blindly and unconsciously, or with freedom and consciousness; unconsciously productive in the perception of the universe, consciously in the creation of an ideal world.⁷⁷

A fifth Kantian influence is the religious dimension, and the attribute of God as the source of power and inspiration, and the mystery of creation. Finally, a sixth Kantian influence is Kant's belief that the artist possessed Geist, which he allied with the imagination: "Spirit is the principle of animation, of upward movement - of talent, of the soul's powers - through ideas; and therefore it is the principle of a purposeful, animated imagination."⁷⁸ This spirit links the ideal (the idea) with the real, and the objective with the subjective. Wilson believed that there was a spiritual world, a 'deep and infinite world, which is gradually opened up within ourselves'.⁷⁹ There was a Beyond which was conscious and infinite and this was the spirit, which Wilson called 'the well-head of thoughts and feelings flowing and overflowing all life...'⁸⁰ which does not represent a 'complex aggregate of impressions embodied

together'.⁸¹ The imagination was always an upward movement, as it always sought the Deity. Ideas were 'the Sowl hersel, and naething but the sowl'⁸² and as intellect grew it became more spiritual, being rooted in the Deity.

In his analysis of imagination, Wilson shows what he regards as its essential and proper form by quoting a passage from Milton's Paradise Lost as an illustration of the way the imagination enters into the object through feelings:

Now came still evening on, and twilight grey
 Had in her sober livery all things clad.
 Silence accompanied - for bird and beast,
 They to their grassy couch, these to their nests,
 Were slunk - all but the wakeful nightingale -
 She all night long her amorous descant sung.
 Silence was pleased: now glowed the firmament
 With living sapphires; Hesperus, that led
 The starry host, rode brightest, till the moon,
 Rising in clouded majesty, at length
 Apparent queen, unveiled her peerless light,
 And o'er the dark her silver mantle threw.⁸³

[598-609]

The passage shows the intuitive power in thought; unconscious thought is felt in advance of conscious, and the effect manifests itself to consciousness as an instinct or feeling. The cause is the material or feeling, and the latter is the form or idea. Wilson distinguishes between the natural imagination which is in our usual idea of Evening, and the heightened imagination which is found in the passage. He points out that the effect is achieved by Milton's use of motion 'of that which has no motion'.⁸⁴ Each object of thought is heightened, namely "Twilight had *clad*", which is an energy of action; "Silence *accompanied*"; "Hesperus *that led*"; "*rode brightest*"; "*clouded majesty*"; "*unveiled her light*"; "*host*"; and "*queen*". The

only part of the description which is not heightened and altered from reality is bird and beast, as they are already animate. Every part is under the imagination in three ways: first, the objects are those that naturally affect the imagination without any heightening from the strong feelings of the poet; second, those brought under the imagination; third, the natural imagination enhanced by such heightenings. The 'skilful progress of impressiveness'⁸⁵ is shown by the gradual rise of each object above another, as for example, with the introduction of living creatures, first those that sleep, then the night-singer, in whom the feeling of animal natural life is raised to its height, by the line "She all night long her amorous descant sung". This is immediately followed by a period of peace and tranquility. The overall effect is one of Unity, as each part combines and forms a whole, and the impression felt is that of 'a LIVING CALM'.⁸⁶ The passage, therefore, illustrates that imagination heightens the mind or the idea, and feelings are an instinct for the moral development of self which can only take place in union with the object. The mind that only relies on intellect, and not on feeling, is advancing causes and not effects. It is necessary to have intellect cultivated with feelings. Feelings spring up suddenly, on the birth of the moment; they are free, and independent of liberty and necessity. Emotions, therefore, must be suggested by the imagination, and it is the power of the poet to assemble, by help of suggestion, such images as will excite the feelings. Poetry is an emotion, a way of feeling, and, as Wilson points out, 'we are poets at all times when our minds are makers'.⁸⁷

Wilson continues his explanation of the imagination with a warning of over-indulgence in its use. There was a danger of undue cultivation, and it must not separate man from domestic life. From which it follows that the imagination in youth should connect its pleasures with the intellect, by never offering in books the 'unrestrained wild delight of imagination'.⁸⁸ Instead, it should become conscious of that faculty only in 'the midst of true and philosophical knowledge'.⁸⁹ He noted the present disposition and spirit of the age,

The whole character of our life and literature seems to us to shew our cultivated classes, a disposition of imagination to separate itself from real life, and to go over into works of art ... there seems to us already a great disappearance of imagination from the character of all our passions.⁹⁰

Imagination was strongly attached to a sense of place, and was not intended to thrive in isolation. As Wilson points out, Burns is the only modern poet who 'looking steadfastly upon the life to which he was born, has depicted it, and changed it into poetry'.⁹¹ It is the attitude adopted by Burns which

appears to us the true test of mind which is born to poetry, and is faithful to its destination. It was not born to live in antecedent worlds, but in its own; in its own world, by its own power, to discover poetry; to discover, that is, to recognise and distinguish the materials of life which belong to imagination.⁹²

The imagination becomes the poetic power, and the source of knowledge for the poet. It is essential, therefore, that the imagination be true to reality:

Imagination discovering material of its own action in the life present around it, ennobles that life, and connects itself with the ongoings of the world; but escaping from that life, it seems to us to fly from its duty, and to desert its place of service.⁹³

(b) The Imagination and the Unconscious

The unconscious nature of the creative mind was an important factor in Wilson's theory. He showed that at all times he was subject to extraordinary vivid and suggestive dreams, and he retained a life-long belief in fairies whom he called the 'Silent People'.⁹⁴ As a young boy he wrote about a dream he had experienced, and this tendency continued when older. He mentions the dreams he experienced at Oxford while a student in his essay Old North and Young North, and he later described in a letter to a friend, when he was the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University, a dream about a white flower which had made a deep impression on his mind. He does not distinguish between sleep and the spiritual state. They are one and the same, and he uses the term 'unconscious' in the spiritual sense, and tries to show it is essential to poetry and truth.

Wilson maintained that 'Day and nicht is the mind active; and indeed sleep is but the intensest state o' wakefu'ness'.⁹⁵ He commented, 'As we grow in stature of soul and body, strange spiritual expansions - wrenchings - rendings - agitate as if they would destroy

us in dreams'.⁹⁶ He quotes Wordsworth's lines on sleep, "Sleep hath its separate world, as wide as dreams."⁹⁷ Dreaming is the way the unconscious expresses itself without the aid of the will and the self. Dreams were 'buried thoughts',⁹⁸ and he describes with great accuracy the intermediary processes between waking and sleeping. He believed that 'the human mind is never, by any chance, at single moment passive'.⁹⁹ In slumber it accomplished its most amazing feats, and 'sleep is the activity of spiritual life'.¹⁰⁰ Dreams were the possible means of obtaining spiritual truths outside ratiocination; by intuition rather than rules. The dream state was the centre of life of the imagination, and night time could release the intuitive faculty and wake up the element of the unconscious to apprehend truths of which the conscious is unaware. As Wilson noted, 'darkness and silence have a power of sorcery over the past'.¹⁰¹ He believed all people were capable of dreaming, and remarked that 'Coleridge says that the dullest wight is sometimes a Shakespeare in his sleep'.¹⁰² Dreams released consciousness from outer reality and showed an inner world turn in on itself. They moved through seeing to truth, and were an expression of art, and showed that the creative mind was an organic growth, from within the unconscious. But Wilson was also a realist, and noted that dreams were of interest only as evidence of the activity of the mind, and could be dismissed once they were over. As Wilson remarked, 'Dreams, however, when they are over, are gone, be they of bliss or bale, heaven or the shades. No one weeps over a dream ... give us reality, "the sober certainty of waking bliss," and to it memory shall cling'.¹⁰³

The purpose of dreams, Wilson noted, was two-fold: first, they ensured the continuity of life as one could meet people who had died in dreams. This meant that life was eternal. Second, they showed the importance of memory which Wilson regarded as more important than imagination. He illustrated this concept in his essay Christmas Dreams:

No need now for any effort of thought. The images rise of themselves - independently of our volition - as if another being, studying the working of our minds, conjured up the phantasmagoria before us who are beholding it with love, wonder, and fear. --- the soul has then, too, often restored to it feelings and thoughts that it had lost, and is made to know that nothing it once experiences ever perishes, but that all things spiritual possess a principle of immortal life.¹⁰⁴

In Noctes Forty Nine, the English Opium Eater conceives the imagination as having its origins deep in the human psyche; it is divined, as Coleridge had argued, in dreams but also in Wordsworth's "Impulses of deeper mood",¹⁰⁵ both of which states the Shepherd experiences with his usual vividness. The Shepherd develops the point further in Noctes Fifty, arguing that truly imaginative people are essentially independent of their external surroundings, and this leads the Opium Eater to acquiesce delightedly in a fundamental wisdom:

Shepherd. Sear his een wi' red-het plates o' irn, or pierce their iris wi' fire-tipped skewers, and soon as the agony has grown dull in his brain-nerves, he will see the Panorama o' Natur still, Mont Blanc and his eagles, Palmyra in the desert, the river o' Amazons, and the sail-swept Ocean wi' all his isles!

English Opium Eater. Author of Kilmeny! that is IMAGINATION! To the sumph (an admirable word), every thing is nothing - to the man of genius, nothing is everything.¹⁰⁶

The Opium Eater argued that it is possible to achieve repose either in the belief that feelings are inherent in the external world, or that they are subjective and are used in a psychological understanding of perception. There was no inbetween state: 'We can rest well in either extreme - but between them rest is there none.'¹⁰⁷

(c) Imagination in relation to the Fine Arts

Possession of a considerable degree of imagination, and a high intellect, constitutes poetical genius, and although mainly displayed in poetry, it is also the foundation of various other arts. When Wilson speaks, as he does, of 'Genius' in his criticism he is not thinking of personality which exists beyond the work of art, but an informing 'soul' within the 'body'.

' - those high minds which, with creative genius, have given, in whatever form, a permanent being to the conceptions of Imagination; whether they have embodied their thoughts in colours, in marble, or in imperishable words, have all trained and enriched their genius in

the same self-meditation.' This is true of those whose arts seem to speak only to the eye ...¹⁰⁸ It is the beauty and truth revealed by genius which becomes the excellence of art, and its achievements the subject of his criticism. Genius, Wilson considered, '---one kind of it at least - is transfusion of self into all outward things. The genius that does that - naturally, but, novelly - is original.'¹⁰⁹ He noted, '--- How genius throws all that arises within itself, out of itself, making that which in respect of the reality is subjective, in respect of the effect or apprehension, objective'.¹¹⁰ The spirit of genius is creative, and people who do not have the 'faculty divine' have yet the 'vision',¹¹¹ that is, the power of seeing and hearing the sights and sounds which genius alone can awaken. He does not distinguish between genres or confine himself to a single art of genre. He discusses literature, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture, all of which are united by the spirit of beauty, and all have a common effect upon the imagination.

Wilson distinguished between the Fine Arts and the Useful Arts, the creative and the practical, the former providing the instruments of communication to the imagination and the revelation by which truth is learnt. The rationale for Wilson's aesthetic was his attitude towards nature which he regarded as 'a Mother Earth'¹¹² and he believed that 'every true and accepted lover of nature regarded her with a painter's as well as a poet's eye'.¹¹³ Both poetry and painting share the same medium of mind, but one (poetry) relates to the ear (the understanding), and one to the eye (the imagination). Both derive from the same source of Nature and Man. It is what the mind perceives, by the painter or the poet, that is expressed either in painting or in a poem; in either case, it is the outward transfer of an inward vision to a specific form. The impressions made by some of the senses are far more easily reproduced by the mind than those of others. 'Of all our senses', Wilson noted, 'there is none from which conception gives back such vivid representation as from the sight'.¹¹⁴

Wilson says he will not define poetry 'because the Cockneys have done so'.¹¹⁵ He then proceeds to give a definition, '--- Everything is poetry which is not mere sensation'.¹¹⁶ It is 'The true exhibition in musical and metrical speech of the thoughts of humanity when coloured by its feelings, throughout the whole range of the physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual regions of its being'.¹¹⁷ Wilson emphasised that poetry is essentially feeling, and as

this is derived from the mind, it unites all people, and everyone is therefore a poet. As he notes, 'we are poets at all times when our minds are makers'¹¹⁸. He declared that, '--- We are enthusiasts in poetry. --- We live, breathe, and have our Being in poetry - it is the Life of our Life - the heart of the mystery---'.¹¹⁹ He felt that, though the present age was a poetical age, it had not produced one Great Poem; it was necessary to look back to the Elizabethan age to find this. 'To this conclusion must we come at last - that in the English language there is one Great Poem. What! Not "Lear". "Hamlet", "Othello", "Macbeth"? - "Paradise Lost"'.¹²⁰ Present poets, he felt, were too Platonic and too metaphysical in their approach towards nature. What was needed by poets was more power and more fire. Their imagination should be directed away from the external world to the heart of life, but it should not be separated from real life, but should draw from the people, their passions, and their feelings. This should be the source of their inspiration for the imagination; only Burns had successfully captured the life and character of the Scottish people in his imagination and changed it into poetry.

Wilson considers the different forms of poetry; descriptive, lyrical and satirical. He felt that 'Descriptive Poetry is either the most dull, or the most delightful thing in the united kingdoms of Art and Nature. To write it well you must see with your eyes shut no such easy operation -- But to enable you to see with your eyes shut, you must begin with seeing with your eyes open---'.¹²¹ The poet, with his sense of beauty could use a word which appealed to the eye and the ear and presented an image in the reader's mind. 'Thus -- the great poets are the great painters, and so are they the great musicians'.¹²² There were many ways, Wilson felt, in which nature could be painted so as to make her poetical: 'Some poets there are, who show you a scene all of a sudden, by means of a few magical words - Others ... create their world gradually before your eyes -- some heap image upon image, piles of imagery on piles of imagery - Others give you but fragments - and some show you Nature glimmering beneath a veil --'.¹²³ Lyrical poetry 'Hath many branches',¹²⁴ including song-writing which Wilson admired, especially the poems of Burns and Moore. But satire was Wilson's favourite genre, and he maintained that 'The highest kind of satire belongs to the highest kind of poetry'.¹²⁵

He regarded it as a gift, shared by many Tories who found it an ideal weapon with which to confront political adversaries, as well as appealing to their general sense of fun. In his essay, The Man of Ton, written 1828, Wilson shows his admiration for particular satirists: 'Dryden was a fine, bold, stout, strong, and sweeping satirist; Pope was an exquisite satirist;---'¹²⁶

The question, what is poetry? is also the same as asking what is a poet? The poet possessed a 'beautifying power' and the "vision and the faculty divine",¹²⁷ by which Wilson meant creativity. As he remarked,

The critic who knows how wide is the empire of the imagination - and who also knows how awful is the power which it exerts over human life, its virtues and happiness - will consider the duties and character of a true poet, with something of a "holy fear",¹²⁸

He adds,

True, that the poet selects all his words - but he selects them in a spirit of inspiration, which is a discriminating spirit - as well as a moving and creative spirit. All that is unfit for his high and holy purpose, of itself fades away; and out of all that is fit, genius, true to nature, chooses whatever is fittest - out of the good - the best.¹²⁹

It follows on, therefore, that good poets are good men; the true character of a true poet is always exhibited in his poetry

- if he be a hypocrite, that'll be seen at once in his poetry, for it'll be bad - but then the verra reverse, by the supposition, is the case, for his poetry is gude; -- a man's real character, then, is as truly shown in his poetry as in his religion. ---¹³⁰

Wilson relates poetry to painting, and notes, 'he who images in poetry has an ampler sphere; and simplicity, though she accompanies the poet still, is no longer a dominant, but a subordinate spirit'.¹³¹ His taste in painting was affected by two contending values in the nineteenth century, the ideal and the picturesque. As a boy he had practised sketching and painting, but he loved 'scenes of beautiful repose'¹³² too deeply to transfer them to canvas, preferring to leave it to genius. He regarded himself as a word-painter, and he could evoke

an atmosphere or scene by the choice of a particular word which presented an image in the mind's eye. He had become familiar through his reading of eighteenth-century literature with the romantic taste of poetry, and as a student he absorbed the idea of Greek art. Landscape painting remained for Wilson the archetypal model for all expression in art as it conveyed the qualities of realism which Wilson believed were essential, and the sense of the sublime and beautiful. It was limited by modern standards, and was confined to expression and the inner feelings of the artists' mind. His preference was for the Scottish landscape, believing that 'his own country ought to be, and generally is, dearest to every man'.¹³³ Also, that 'the love of nature is strong in the hearts of the inhabitants of our Island... The impulses that make us desire to widen the circle of our observation, are all impulses of delight and love; and it would be strange indeed if they do not move us, first of all, towards whatever is most beautiful belonging to our own land.'¹³⁴ He declines to say who should be awarded the palm for painting landscapes. 'It is not for us to say whether our native Painters, or the "old masters", have shown the greatest genius in landscape; but if the palm must be yielded to them whose works have been consecrated by a reverence, as often, perhaps, superstitious as religious, we do not fear to say that their superiority is not to be attributed in any degree to the scenery on which they exercised the art its beauty had inspired.'¹³⁵ Wilson did not like portrait paintings as he believed they lacked 'character', but he acknowledges that some paintings by the "old master" do embody a world of intellect. He has particular praise for the wider-sweeping style of the Scottish painters, in particular the Rev. John Thomson of Duddingston whom he called 'the best landscape-painter in Scotland. The man's a poet'.¹³⁶ He notes features which evoke the sublime, such as the sea and castles, especially his landscape of Kinbane Castle and Torthorwald Castle, Dumfriesshire. The paintings of Paul Potter and John Boath, both Scottish painters, are praised. The defects which Wilson feels are so apparent in portrait painting are pointed out, but, at the same time, he pays tribute to the "old masters", such as Rembrandt and Correggio. Raeburn was 'the greatest portrait-painter Scotland ever produced'.¹³⁷ Wilson had praise, too, for drawing as a fine art, commenting, 'Of all the accomplishments of a gentleman, I do not know one superior to that of being a good draughtsman.'¹³⁸ He felt, though, that there was a tendency for sketchers

simply to study nature solely for the sake of art, and not with a sense of 'reverential awe'¹³⁹. Notable books on art, which attracted reviews by Wilson, included works by Reynolds, whose spirit, he felt, was 'all in delightful keeping with his pictures';¹⁴⁰ Colonel Murray's Outlines showed a style of drawing and engraving that was adapted to the delineation of scenery; John Fleming's Select Views of the Lakes of Scotland from Original Paintings, was in a different style but illustrative of many of the same scenes. The two works together, Wilson believed, 'bring the lakes and seas of Scotland, its woods, glens, and mountains, more vividly before my eyes, than any other works of art that I now remember'.¹⁴¹

The influences which affect the mind through imagination also present emotion to the human mind through the sense of the ear. The mind retains a power over the operation of this sense even in sleep, as Wilson observed. It is easier to recall a succession of sounds than any other tone; 'Those mysteriously related sounds'¹⁴² which constitute music had a significant moral power for Wilson. He was a music lover, and many of his earliest memories were connected with tunes heard in childhood. He noted how easily early associations could be recalled by hearing a familiar tune and the happy memories it evoked. The power of music, he believed, undoubtedly had a prodigious influence on many strong national feelings and an influence over national manners and character. It had always been blended with the feelings and the service of religion, and in times of national crisis the souls of the people has been inspired at the sound of turbulent or arousing hymns. In humble and lowly conditions of life, too, labour and poverty was lightened by the sound of music. In addition, there were other sounds 'sublime or touching'¹⁴³ which are heard in nature and help to identify man with a deeper spiritual power. They arise out of the very nature to which man and his life belong, and acquire a wider significance as they become part of his 'fond imaginative conception of the places in which he has found all he loves, the hope, and the purpose of his being'.¹⁴⁴

Feelings arising from the sense of taste and smell suggest no preconception of an external form. The Sense of Smell is intimately connected with that of taste, and Wilson quotes a line of Thomson where he speaks in his Seasons, when describing the odours of a rural morning, of "Tasting the smell of dairy."¹⁴⁵ Wilson observed that, although of all the

senses, that of smell has the narrowest range, and the least influence on our ideas, yet its sensations become, from association, of considerable power over the mind. He points out the charm in all the odours of external nature, and how much of its beauty it felt to be breathed or inhaled into the soul. He comments, 'The gently and widely-diffused fragrance of leaves and flowers, and blossoms, imparts an unconscious satisfaction to the rudest mind; and to the more refined, is acknowledged in delight to be as touching as the sound of joy that is warbling in the groves and woods. The faint and dying odour of things so fair and perishable, are combined in the mind with all our feelings about the flowery families of the field.'¹⁴⁶

The sense of smell also conveys sensations that the imagination can convert into emotions of sublimity, as well as of beauty. Wilson gives as an example the heart of a thunderstorm, where no person was insensible, in the midst of the sultry air, of the sulphurous smell of the electric fluid, without feeling it to be as awful as the flash and sound. The cold, damp smell of a decayed ruin, mixed perhaps with the sweet odour of the wallflower, deeply affects the soul. There is a sepulchral smell, which, to the imagination, in its sublimest thoughts of the terrors of death, suggests, by association, the smell of a great field of battle, and the decay of human life. Wilson quotes Milton's description of Death, 'exulting in his future prey',¹⁴⁷ where the poet 'sublimely sings',¹⁴⁸ and borrows a 'daring'¹⁴⁹ image from a sense normally expected to awaken only ordinary associations -

So saying, with delight he snuffed the smell
Of mortal change on earth, as when a flock
Of ravenous fowl, though many a league remote,
Against the day of battle to a field
Where armies lie encamp'd, come flying, lured
With scent of living carcasses, design'd
For death the following day in bloody fight,
So scented the grim Feature, and upturn'd
His nostril far into the murky air,
Sagacious of his quarry from afar.¹⁵⁰

(d) Imagination and Fancy

Wilson distinguished between Fancy and Imagination, regarding them as separate faculties. The former was non-creative and a compound; it was part of the mental development, but without the power to shape or create. As Wilson observed, 'Let there be but a body o' Truth, and nane fear but imagery will coalesce around it'.¹⁵¹ In the *Sixtieth Noctes*, Christopher North asks Ambrose, the inn keeper: 'Do you understand, Ambrose, the distinction between Fancy and Imagination, as drawn by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, and Wordsworth in one of his philosophical prefaces, in which he labours to tell us what poetry is, in despair, I presume, of being able to effect that purpose by his verses?'¹⁵² Ambrose replies:

I read no philosophical criticism, sir, but in the Magazine. As far as I have been able to master the occasional hints thrown out in that immortal work, it seems to me, sir, that Fancy is the faculty by which the human mind collects round any object of thought a certain conglomeration of corresponding and congenial images, united by some accidental and capricious associations, which consequently are, in comparison, feeble and evanescent, inasmuch as they are obedient, as well in their going as in their coming, to moods moving along the surface of the mind, than by those everlasting links of feeling or of passion, sir, which, though oftentimes invisible, are nevertheless always felt, when the capacity of emotion is brought into power, and the creative function of the soul is at work to reproduce, and in the reproduction beautifies the essential and primordial elements of emotion, one of these being, beyond all doubt, intellectual perception, and another intellectual conception, thus growing into new and original form which, when intensified into life by the true Promethean fire, are universally confessed to be, even while the mystery of their generation remains a secret to the minds of those affected by them to very transport, *Forms of the Imagination*.¹⁵³

Wilson popularised Coleridge's distinction, but he used it as compound which does not produce poetry. It is secondary to imagination, and is creative but only within the images already acquired. This fits Coleridge's assumption that Fancy works with 'materials ready-made from the law of association.'¹⁵⁴

The distinction between the two concepts is first seen in his review of Thomas Moore's Lalla Rookh in June 1817. Wilson describes Moore's particular poetic qualities:

Mr Moore is beyond all comparison the most ingenious, brilliant, and fanciful Poet of the present age ---- He possesses the political temperament to excess, and his mind seems always in a state of pleasure, gladness, and delight, even without the aid of imagination, and by means merely of the constant succession and accumulation of feelings, sentiments, and images.¹⁵⁵

Wilson's description of Moore's 'ever-active and creative Fancy, which at all times commands the whole range of his previously acquired images'¹⁵⁶ is similar to Coleridge's own thoughts. In a later passage Wilson stresses the interrelation of Imagination with Fancy:

whenever imagination requires and asks the aid of her sister fancy. - whenever generous and lofty sensibilities, to the glory and triumph of human nature, display themselves in the concentration of patriotism or devotion, then the genius of Moore expands and kindles ...¹⁵⁷

Wilson concludes by reminding readers that Moore

makes his advances to our hearts, rather by the sinuous and blooming bye-ways and lanes of the fancy, than by the magnificent and royal road of the imagination.¹⁵⁸

This clearly demonstrates the difference between the two faculties, and evaluates their separate nature. The use of the terms Fancy and Imagination for Wilson is shown by their reference in at least fourteen reviews which he wrote for BM between 1817-1830.

What Wilson is setting out is a standard or pattern for living. He does not have a specific philosophy but drew on the ideas that were already present. He is concerned with the history of the human mind as a stage of development of knowledge. In his interpretation of imagination as a form of reason he is closer to Wordsworth and Stewart than Coleridge who

believed it was a power in itself. Wilson's insistence that poetry comes from reason and not sensibility shows his affirmation of a faith of science characteristic of much nineteenth century aesthetic. There is an inner reality of thought and feeling, and the imagination is concerned with this as the faculty by which we know the beautiful. The early philosophers were more concerned with moral powers; the metaphysicians wish to know (the mind) as a living being with powers; now the psychologists wish to know a faculty. Reid, with the Scottish School of Common Sense, led the way and since his time the heart of enquiry in Scotland has been to the physiology of the mind. Although Wilson took his intellectual roots from Locke, he rejected the experience and empirical associationism of rationalism and science in favour of intuition and the imagination. The senses could not reach infinity, and the present 'low philosophy'¹⁵⁹ was concerned with sensationalism and the belief that knowledge was derived solely from sense experience. Locke aimed to reduce the human intellect to useful employment, and, as Wilson noted, "he exhorted and guided men to enquire, and no doubt his bold example and distinguished success aroused a spirit of enquiry which has not again fallen asleep".¹⁶⁰ As a classicist, Wilson looks back in a spirit of antiquity to the Greeks, who drew their knowledge from nature. Facts do not supply truths; Bacon, the 'wisest of men',¹⁶¹ stood at the dawning of an era, with a revolution in thinking which showed nature dominant, and to find eternal truths one must embrace nature.

The origin of our knowledge is only known by the universal mind, through sympathy. What are we doing, Wilson believes, but comparing intuition with reality, and bringing back knowledge to its origin and comparing or accepting or rejecting it. He believed that one can treat the human mind in two ways:

1. One can treat knowledge as it exists, and can examine the relationship between ideas;
2. One can show in nature how the human mind works and becomes possessed of the matter of its knowledge, which is psychology. It is seeking the laws of action of the living soul. Wilson believed that there was no satisfactory explanation of the origin of human knowledge which does not have an explanation of the laws of belief. His views had moved

from commonsense to infinity and religion, from rationalism and subjectivism to expressionism.

It is within the exercise of the human faculty that the imagination works, through aesthetics, in a moral sense to give pleasure and excellence rather than happiness or virtue. It is the supreme end of Man, and works with the will. What determines the choice of moral agents is their conduct and action. Pleasure is not sufficient, and one must choose what has been constituted by virtue, which is taste linked to moral judgements. As Wilson reminded readers, we are creatures of imagination and reason; imagination was a force in life, and the instrument or means of ensuring that the right kind of knowledge is taught. As he notes in the Recreations when men 'look and listen, and think and feel'¹⁶² they are enriched and inspired by the imaginative experience. When called upon to see imaginatively, or within the mind, one's inner vision deepened and became more penetrative than bodily vision, which had the corresponding effect of an enlargement of the mind. This is what Wordsworth meant when he called poetry 'the finer spirit of all knowledge'.¹⁶³ Its source was the human existence, and experience determined its poetic form. There was, therefore, a link between the imagination and the Book of Life and the Book of Nature which the next section of the thesis explores. It was important that the right sort of education should be taught. It should be beneficial and concentrate on the higher spiritual truths which were reflected in poetry. Moral knowledge, (and feeling), Wilson believed, was intrinsically linked with the sum of human happiness, but idealism could not be separated from reality. We need both thought and feeling to find knowledge and happiness, and a philosophy of life.

Part D : Criticism

The English and Scottish Poets

Introduction

Wilson showed little regard for reviewing. In Noctes No. Eight the Shepherd comments, 'Tuts - What's the use o' reviewin? Naething like a screed o' extracts into a magazine taken in the kintra .---'¹ The core of Wilson's criticism in literature is poetical, and the spirit of poetry breathes through his writings. His interest in the working of the poetic imagination indicates a Wordsworthian concept of poetry as he remarks that, instead of memorising poetry, some verses merely 'committed themselves to my memory,'² with the result that 'thousands and tens of thousands of small poems lie buried alive in my mind; and when I am in a perfectly peaceful mood, there is a resurrection of the beautiful, like flocks of flowers issuing out of the ground, at the touch of Spring.'³ To imagine is to perceive and to create, and to perceive clearly is 'Poetry - Philosophy - Religion'⁴, all in one. It is by this test that he tries all the writers he touches upon, and his choice reflects his nationalism and the age in which he lived. This varied from attacking Tennyson to bringing forward Wordsworth's poetry in Scotland. To Wilson criticism is like an unweeded garden, and he sees himself as removing some of the weeds. The BM reflects its editor's mind, and Wilson's mind is contradictory, male, discursive, and aristocratic. His contradictions entered into his writings, and showed two images - the flamboyant entertainer, and the sensitive, moralist concerned with ethics and human nature. His object is to make readers think and feel, and to develop a feeling mind. He notes, 'Mortal man in this world must either make a merit of necessity, and so succumb to his lot, however severe the suffering or bitter the disappointment - or he must reconcile himself to it, as we have done now, by calling to his aid the power of Poetry, Philosophy, and Religion.'⁵ Feelings and images are arranged so that the reader will be moved morally and spiritually. As 'Christopher North', Wilson still lives and his memory is perpetuated in his Recreations.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wilson and Wordsworth

Wilson was one of Wordsworth's earliest admirers, describing him as the 'Plato of Poetry',⁶ the 'Divine Wordsworth',⁷ and 'the wisest of nature's bards'.⁸ 'His soul is like a star, and dwelt apart',⁹ and the reading of Wordsworth's poems was to have an influence on his own poetry and future development as a philosopher and moralist. His criticism is uneven and inconsistent, alternating between adulation and ecstatic praise and personal abuse, but the passages of praise far outweigh the abusive ones. The swings of mood reflect the evidence of his lack of a 'tie-beam', but his early perception of Wordsworth's greatness shows his aptitude and insight as a critic, and certainly his recognition of Wordsworth's poetry was one of his most successful achievements as reviewer and critic.

In 1802 Wordsworth received a letter from Wilson expressing admiration of the Lyrical Ballads which had recently been published. Wilson's original impression of the effect the Lyrical Ballads made on him was recorded in BM of May, 1835:

Five-and-thirty years have since fled over our heads - but in the midst of many changes which time has wrought in our inner world no change has there ever been either of thought or of feeling than awakened by the poetry of Wordsworth. No change - but a perpetual deepening and strengthening, and sanctifying - our love growing more solemn, and at times sadder, in the consciousness of the near approach of our life to its close... In the joy that then all at once brightened our whole being, and that was felt to be one with the joy of nature beautified by a new poetry ---, in the expansion and elevation of our spirits we too felt as if we were Poets -- It was as if an angel had met us on the way, and spoken to us of a new world and a new life even beneath the very skies and on the very earth with which we had been familiar in youth's often unthinking happiness.¹⁰

The third edition of Lyrical Ballads appeared in 1802, and from Glasgow College, on 24th May, Wilson wrote a long letter, with his friend, Alexander Blair, conveying his enthusiasm, 'To you, sir, mankind is indebted to a new kind of poetry'¹¹. He apologises for intruding, then praises him, and criticises him by pointing out what he felt were discrepancies. He had admired all the poems except for The Idiot Boy, and he proceeds to discuss the aesthetic pleasure principle in relation to The Idiot Boy, noting that, "No feeling, no state of mind ought, in my opinion, to become the subject of poetry, that does not please."¹² He continued,

"No description can please where the sympathies of our soul are not excited, and no narration interested where we do not enter into the feelings of some of the parties concerned. On this principle, many feelings which are undoubtedly natural, are improper subjects for poetry ... There are a thousand occurrences happening every day which do not in the least interest an unconcerned spectator, though they no doubt occasion various emotions in the breast of those to whom they immediately relate. To describe these in poetry would be improper."¹³

Wilson concluded in his letter, "I therefore think, that in the choice of this subject, you have committed an error."¹⁴ The letter is important as it showed Wilson's early appreciation of the Lyrical Ballads, and his reply led Wordsworth to explain his poetic principles in his defence of the writing of The Idiot Boy. Wilson was only a student of seventeen and already he showed a poetic sympathy and a firm understanding of Wordsworth's theories of poetry, which encouraged the poet to send an early reply to his admirer. In his responses, a week later on May 31st, which was probably a joint effort with his sister, Dorothy, Wordsworth develops the poetic principles which he had stated earlier in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads in 1800 and revised in 1802. He points out the deficiencies in "human nature, as it has been and ever will be,"¹⁵ and to the prejudices of the particular upper and middle-class audience. A poet should try to change people's feelings, not just write about what interests them, and should make them more interested in things that they were not before. He aimed to correct these deficiencies, noting that,

"a great Poet ... ought, to a certain degree, to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things. He ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides."¹⁶

Poetry, Wordsworth argued, must please 'human nature as it has been and ever will be,'¹⁷ and it is very poorly represented by much of human nature as people had been perverted by 'false refinements' and 'artificial desires'. Wordsworth said he had enjoyed writing *The Idiot Boy*, and reading it gave him pleasure. He pointed out that idiots were revered in the East; 'it is there that we see the strength, disinterestedness, and grandeur of love.'¹⁸

The following year Wilson went up to Oxford where he experienced a brilliant academic career, and on leaving he decided that he wanted to be a poet like Wordsworth. He had a private fortune and settled at Elleray on Windermere, where he was determined to meditate the Lakeland Muse, and by 1810 he had sufficient material to publish to become a complete member of the Lake School of poetry. Wilson showed a marked reticence at first meeting Wordsworth, but the friendship developed, and from 1807 to early in 1815 he lived on terms of intimacy with the poet and his family. He records a description of his first meeting with Wordsworth:

The Bard was a mere boy of some six lustres, and had a lyrical-ballad look that established his identity at first sight, all unlike the lackadaisical. His right hand was within his vest on the region of his heart, and he ceased his crooning as we stood face to face. What a noble countenance! at once austere and gracious - haughty and benign - of a man conscious of his greatness while yet companioning with the humble - an unrecognised power dwelling in the woods.¹⁹

He also came to meet and know Coleridge and De Quincey, who was to become a life-long friend. Both Wilson and De Quincey were chosen as godfathers to Wordsworth's youngest child, and there were joint expeditions and social visits within this literary circle. In 1809 Wilson published in Coleridge's The Friend, a letter signed 'Mathetes' ("a learner") which encouraged Wordsworth to reply. Wilson hints that Wordsworth might be able to offer some moral instruction, and in the Letter to Mathetes Wordsworth, in the role of teacher, replies to this request for advice on moral guidance to a youth setting out in life.

Wordsworth suggests that there is 'a progress of human nature towards perfection'²⁰ in both moral worth and intellectual power. He sets the moral tone: 'There is a life and spirit in knowledge which we extract from truth'.²¹ Knowledge comes from mind and is an individual choice, although one can be guided, and all may obtain the 'sublimities of virtue'²² which come from knowledge. There is a general law of growth of every individual mind: childhood and youth are taught 'through the affections',²³ by the sympathies, thus 'developing the understanding',²⁴ manhood is guided by the 'reason', by the 'thinking mind' which sees beauty as it unfolds itself, not to the eye but to the imagination and the mind. Wordsworth is emphasising the superiority of thought and action and the unity of mind, the combined faculties of imagination, feeling, and reason. The object is an act of obedience to a moral law established individually, that is, by freedom of choice, and therefore morality is implying in its essence a voluntary obedience and effect of order to a higher law. It transfers in a highly-developed imagination the moral law to physical nature, and was obeying a power of Duty, 'Be ye perfect ---.' Mathetes, as a youth, must exercise his mind and use the faculty accorded him, which is Fancy. Creative activity is proof positive of the freedom of the mind as a 'self-directed' thing, above Nature, and using her for its own purpose. The object is ultimate truth, which is a state of happiness or pleasure, and the progression towards this state suggests that culture comes from the heart as well as the head. Wordsworth's quality of mind, then, is evident first in the letter to Wilson about the Lyrical Ballads, where he explains his poetic doctrine, then the 'Letter to Mathetes' where he expresses his philosophy of life. Both letters are interesting as they show how his poetry and philosophy is blended and develop with experience, and they help him to define Wilson's philosophical

approach as a critic of Wordsworth's poetry and the questions of morality and philosophy which were going to be reflected in his criticism. In a letter some twenty years later, to Professor Hamilton, Wordsworth writes, September 26, 1830:

Your views of action and contemplation are, I think, just. If you can lay your hands upon Mr. Coleridge's "Friend," you will find some remarks of mine upon a letter signed, if I recollect right, "Mathetes," which was written by Professor Wilson, in which, if I am not mistaken, sentiments like yours are expressed. At all events, I am sure that I have long retained those opinions, and frequently expressed them either by letter or otherwise. One thing, however, is not to be forgotten concerning active life - that a personal independence must be provided for; and in some cases more is required - ability to assist out friends, relations, and natural dependents.²⁵

Wilson's allegiance to the Lake School of Poetry was evident in his early poems written in his teens. Jeffrey encouraged Wilson to contribute to the *Edinburgh Review*, and Wilson was already writing reviews despite his friendship with Wordsworth. Jeffrey was, by temperament, hostile to the Lake School, and 'its offensive assumption of exclusive taste, judgement and morality',²⁶ but he praised Wilson's poem the *Isle of Palms*, which appeared in 1812, largely at the expense of Wordsworth. Wordsworth had upset Scottish critics with his comments on criticism in general, and, in turn, his promotion of radical values and the establishment of a new culture was seen, particularly by Jeffrey, as a threat to the present social order. The 'prosperity of Scott, or Campbell, or Crabbe', Jeffrey noted, had not been won by 'ecstasies about spades or sparrows eggs - or men gathering leeches - or women in duffle coats - or plates and porringers - or washing tubs.'²⁷ In 1811 Wilson married and started practising as a lawyer at the Scottish Bar, and also was writing poetry. In the number of *Edinburgh Review* for June 1816 Jeffrey praised Wilson's newly published volume, *The City of the Plague and Other Poems*, assuring him that 'he had undoubtedly the heart and fancy of a poet.'²⁸ The inclusion of Wilson with the "Lake School" seems to have upset Wordsworth, and in a letter to Henry Crabbe Robinson he wrote, 'He is a perverse mortal, not to say worse of him. Have you ever peeped into his *Trials of Margaret Lyndsay*? You

will see there to what an extent he has played the plagiarist with the very tale of Margaret in *The Excursion* which he abuses; and you will also, with a glance, learn what passes with him for poetical Christianity. More mawkish stuff I never encountered."²⁹ The collected edition of Wilson's poems, in two volumes, appeared in 1825, when he was thirty seven, and again Jeffrey noted the similarity with the Lake School. It had 'less of the peculiarities of the Lake School' and was 'quite free from the paltry spite and fanatical reprobation with which different minds had been treated'.³⁰ Wilson himself complained about the general feeling that he was supposed to write in imitation of Wordsworth, and said the cries of 'Wordsworth! Wordsworth!' made him turn from poetry to prose. As he remarked, 'Therefore, with the fear of "*The Excursion*" before our eyes, we took to prose - to numerous prose - aye, though we say it that should not say it, to prose as numerous as any verse--'.³¹ One reviewer observed that, 'His poems are full of beauty; they have all the freshness of the heather; a true relish for nature breaks out in all of them; they are the errant breathings of a happy and buoyant spirit-a-giving out, as it were, of the breath that had been inhaled among the mountains'.³² At the same time, Wilson was showing a deviance from Wordsworth; he was now 'the stamp-master'³³ and not 'a man of high intellect and profound sensibility'.³⁴ In 1820 Wordsworth wrote a testimonial on behalf of Wilson's application for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, and in 1825 entertained Wilson, now Professor Wilson, along with other celebrities at a champagne regatta.

Wilson's criticism of Wordsworth is spread throughout his writings. His position as the champion of Wordsworth is evident in his reviews of Wordsworth's poetry in which he put some of the best Wordsworthian criticism, notably: *Essays on the Lake School of Poetry*, No. 1: Wordsworth's *White Doe of Rylstone* of July 1818; *Essays on the Lake School of Poetry* No. 11: *On the Habits of Thought, inculcated by Wordsworth*, of December, 1818; his tribute to the poet in the review both of Crabbe's *Tales of the Hall*, July, 1819, and of Wordsworth's *Sonnets and Memorials*, August, 1822. In contrast there are strong attacks in October 1823 and September 1825 in *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Even though there is praise in

other articles, there is evidence that Wilson intended to attack Wordsworth in the Quarterly not long after he had died.

Wilson had become acquainted with Wordsworth as a student with his letter on the Lyrical Ballads, and he had come to a different conclusion from Jeffrey about the nature of criticism. In a review of Campbell's Specimens of English Poetry in 1819, he wrote:

During no period of our literature was there ever more need than at present of philosophical criticism on poetry by poets. Professed critics, from the highest to the lowest, have set themselves by far too much in defiance and hostility to the great masters of the art, whose principles they have taken it upon themselves to expound; and an arrogant tone of assumed superiority almost universally pervades the body of our periodical criticism...

There is no extravagance in saying that poetry is religion - and that pure-souled and high-minded poets are its ministers. The critic who knows how wide is the empire of the imagination - and who also knows how awful is the power which it exerts over human life, its virtues and its happiness - will consider the duties and character of a true poet with something of a 'holy fear' - and he will be cautious how he impairs either his own reverence or the reverence of others, towards those who are emphatically the benefactors of mankind, so long as they dedicate themselves to pure ministrations - and to the vindication of the dignity of human desires and human faculties.³⁵

It was within this context that Wilson described Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron as 'the three great master- spirits of the day, in the poetical world',³⁶ and that 'Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, and others, are men to stand undiminished -- undwindled, by the side of the giants of the olden time'.³⁷ Wordsworth in particular, and to a lesser extent, Scott, set the standards by which their contemporaries were judged. Every major poet

of the period shows Wordsworth's beneficial influence, and he has 'exerted a power over the mind of the age of deeper and more permanent operation than that of all the rest of poetry by which it has been elevated and adorned.'³⁸

The review in the BM in July, 1818, introduced Wordsworth to the Scottish public. It was a defence of the Lyrical Ballads and an attack on the critics who had already attacked The Excursion, in particular Jeffrey. As Wilson noted, '-- scarcely one syllable of truth - that is, of knowledge -- has ever appeared in the Edinburgh Review on the general principles of Wordsworth's Poetry, or, as it has been somewhat vaguely, and not very philosophically, called, the Lake School of Poetry.'³⁹ He possessed essential qualities: high intellect, profound sensibility, sense, imagination, passion, and a reflective and meditative pose: 'With all the great and essential faculties of the Poet he possesses the calm and self-commanding powers of the Philosopher.'⁴⁰ He combined both thought and feeling, and he was a poet in every sense of the term. He was fully professional, and had devoted his whole life to poetry. 'He is the Head of the Lake School, just as his brother is Master of Trinity,'⁴¹ and the result is seven volumes of poetry 'as beautiful as ever charmed the ears of Pan and of Apollo.'⁴² He is the only living poet who has written poetry for the sake of his own genius, and for the benefit of readers, and the glory of his Creator. As Wilson observes, 'He is their benefactor by beautifying their character and their condition as they lie in "the light of common day," tinging that light with colours unborrowed from the sun that shines before our sensuous eyes, and seemingly drawn from some spiritual font flowing from the depth of his own moral being - more tranquil than night.'⁴³ The same spirit of love, and benignity, and ethereal purity which was shown in his pictures of the virtues and happiness of man, also pervaded those of external nature. He had made himself the master of 'that Poetry that commences with the forms, and hues, and odours, and sounds, of the material world. He has brightened the earth we inhabit to our eyes; he has made it more musical to our ears; he has rendered it more creative to our imaginations.'⁴⁴ No one had excelled him in his descriptions of nature, not even Thomson. His mode of thinking and expression had made him 'the most ORIGINAL POET OF THE AGE.'⁴⁵ Wilson comments:

He was the first man who impregnated all his descriptions of external nature with sentiment or passion. In this he has been followed - often successfully - by other true poets. He was the first man that vindicated the native dignity of human nature, by shewing that all her elementary feelings were capable of poetry - and in that too he has been followed by other true Poets, although here he stands, and probably ever will stand, unapproached. He was the first man that stripped thought and passion of all vain or foolish disguise and shewed them in their just proportions and unencumbered power. He was the first man who in poetry knew the real province of language, and suffered it not to veil the meanings of the spirit.⁴⁶

In meditative poetry, he is regarded as the poet who has seen deeper into the constitution of the human soul than any other since the days of Shakespeare. Wilson commented that, 'In some respects Mr. Wordsworth may be considered as the Rousseau of the present times.'⁴⁷ They were both educated among the mountains, at a distance from social life, and acquired, from their way of existence, certain 'peculiar sentimental habits of meditation',⁴⁸ which were pitched in a different key from the 'callous, sarcastic, and practical'⁴⁹ way of thinking, prevalent among their contemporaries of the cities.

When Wilson described Wordsworth's poetry as, 'a true but a beautiful reflection of life',⁵⁰ and that he has 'produced poetry reflecting the shadows of our existence',⁵¹ he was putting into words what the poet had said himself. Wordsworth had written that his themes were

On man, on nature and on human life

Musing in solitude!

Wilson remarked, 'The earth - the middle air - the sky - the heaven - the heart, mind, and soul of man - are "the haunt and main region of his song."⁵² In his poetry, there is an image of what, to Wordsworth's eye appears to be human life. But, in Wilson's opinion, there was a defect in that image, and he maintained that, among the great living poets Wordsworth's poetry was to him the most inexplicable on the subject of its religion. His inspiration was drawn from nature, and he could not be called a Christian poet. There was

no allusion, except in passing, of religion as a Revelation. In all his poetry published previous to 'The Excursion', the spirit of religion is 'but the "Religion of the Woods"',⁵³ and is not Christianity.

Wordsworth is concerned with awakening in the minds of his countrymen certain qualities, or what Wilson calls 'luneries', and an awareness of certain convictions of moral laws which exist silently in the universe. These could best be studied in ordinary life and in nature, where people are free from the artificiality of urban society. All men at times "muse on nature with a poet's eye", but with Wordsworth it was 'the fruit of wisdom and experience'.⁵⁴ From external nature Wordsworth had received a soul and becomes our teacher. His 'transcendent genius'⁵⁵ had made nature 'pregnant with spiritualities',⁵⁶ and he worshipped at her shrine as 'the High Priest of Nature'.⁵⁷ Wilson observed that, '--- He tunes his mind to nature almost with a feeling of religious obligation; ---this poet (whether justly or not) thinks he traces something more in the spectacle than the mere reflection of his own feelings, painted upon external objects, by means of the association of ideas; or, at least, seems to consider what we then behold as the instantaneous creation of the mind.'⁵⁸ There was a correspondence of mind and nature, through imaginative sympathy, and the ennobling influences of nature led to spiritual and moral enlightenment. Deity is seen as it is felt, that is, it is seen by feeling, and only what is felt is seen. The feeling is all seeing, so cessation of feeling is utter darkness, and there is intellectual death. Intellectual development and imagination cultivated an awareness of the beautiful and a sense of happiness, which was what Wordsworth meant when he said of beauty: 'Thou pitchest thy Tents before him'⁵⁹. From the great features of nature, lochs and mountains,

impulses of deeper mood

Have come to him in solitude

than ever visited the heart of any other poet. He did not paint only to the eye and the imagination, although all his poems were beautiful to both. He took it for granted that people can now see and hear, and he desired to make them feel and understand. All his poems have

a moral meaning, even more than moral, and his poetry can only be comprehended, in spirit and scope, by those who feel the sublimity of these four lines in his Ode to Duty:

Flowers laugh before thee on their beds
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,
And the most ancient heavens through thee
are fresh and strong. [Ode to Duty: 45-49]

Its influence varies according to individuals' taste or character, and to the unimaginative the poetry of Wordsworth will appear as "As is a picture to a blind man's eye"⁶⁰. But to the poetic mind will come religious truth, and a moral awareness that "The primal duties shine aloft - like stars."⁶¹

When Wilson said that the poetical character of Wordsworth's highest poetry was 'truly sublime',⁶² he meant that it was essentially spiritual. As Wilson remarked, 'But he who lives in the spirit of another creed, sees far into the heart of Christianity'.⁶³ No subject was too high for Wordsworth's muse, but sometimes it made his poetry too mystical. Wilson noted that, 'the most imaginative poetry inspired by Nature, and dedicated to her praise, is never perfectly and consummately beautiful till it ascends into the religious'.⁶⁴ From pure poetry came his meditative moods, and by moods, images find their way into his heart. This sphere of reflection gave his poetry a still and religious character which is sublime. The bent of his mind was towards the sublime, but in his mystic strain there was a tendency to forget the world of sense in order to seek the infinite. His imaginative poetic exaltation, and an ingrained belief in love were philosophical ideals, and there was a risk that his 'contemplative Platonism'⁶⁵ could not be easily understood or acceptable. Wilson observed, 'From the first line of the "Lyrical Ballads" to the last of "The Excursion" - it is avowedly one system of thought and feeling, embracing his experiences of human life, and his meditations on the moral government of this world'.⁶⁶ Apart from representing poetical objects and moving readers' sympathy, he was proposing a system of philosophical opinions: 'that the language of poetry is but the language of strong passion; that in the great elementary principles of thought and feeling, common to all the race, the subject matter of poetry is to be

sought and found; that enjoyment and suffering, as they wring and crush, or expand and elevate, are the sources of song.⁶⁷ Wilson considered that this creed, moulded by sympathy and religious emotions, was sometimes too austere and dealt too much with 'misguided sensibilities and perverted passions'.⁶⁸ His lofty philosophy had suggested a greater affinity with Milton than any other poet, but, if this were the case, Wilson regarded the affinity as one in manner than in substance.

Wordsworth's high philosophy referred almost entirely to the intellectual poems of 'The Excursion' and 'The White Doe of Rylstone'. Wordsworth's interest in nature was followed by an interest in man. It was in the poems dealing with "the still sad music of humanity"⁶⁹ that Wilson believed was reflected the religious worship of nature in which Wordsworth had led his whole life. Wordsworth stood along with Burns and Crabbe as 'the three poets who, in our days, have most successfully sought the subjects and scenes of their inspiration in the character and life of the People. ---those Three have, in almost all their noblest compositions, grappled closely with the feelings which at all times constitute the hearts and souls of our own Islanders, so that the haunt of their song may be said to have lain in the wide and magnificent regions of the British character. Accordingly, their poetry has been more deeply felt, where it has been felt at all, than that of any of their contemporaries.'⁷⁰ Humanity is a poor race, subject to sin, sorrow, and death, but since the revelation of Christianity, all people are equal in the sight of God. Hence the expression, 'We are all brethren in wretchedness'.⁷¹ Wilson quotes Wordsworth's Preface: "At the risk of giving a shock to the prejudices of artificial society, I have ever been ready to pay homage to the aristocracy of nature under a conviction that vigorous human-heartedness is the constituent principle of true taste."⁷² Wilson's sentiment was that, "These are Wordsworth's own words, and deserve letters of gold."⁷³ Wordsworth never separates himself in spirit from the humblest of his brethren of mankind. To him, the mystery of life is awful, and in his thoughts of God's humblest children he looks on them all with tenderness and benignity. Wilson comments, 'In the Old Beggar going from door to door he sees one of God's ministers. And a low-born man, of highest wisdom, is with the great poet among the sunsets

- an instructor and a monitor, who belonged of old to "a virtuous household, though exceedingly poor."⁷⁴ Wordsworth does not, unlike Burns, identify himself with the class of people he has painted, but, at the same time, he 'graciously and humanely descends into the lowliest walks of life.'⁷⁵ He knows humanity is sacred, and views its spirit with reverence. As Wilson emphasises, he is the poet of meditation, and his passion is of nature, and only Burns had looked deeply at life and transformed it into poetry. Much of the best poetry of this age, although imaginative, deals with man's homeliest interests, 'because our best poets "have all one human heart."⁷⁶ Wilson loved Wordsworth's poetry best when it deals with 'the purest and most delightful fancies and affections of the human heart'.⁷⁷ His poems on this theme show that 'the same spirit of love, and benignity, and ethereal purity, which breathes over all his pictures of the virtues and the happiness of man, pervades those too of external nature.'⁷⁸ Wilson noted that his prophecy that, next to Cowper, Wordsworth would, before long, be the best loved poet in happy domestic circles, was fast being fulfilled. It wanted for its complete fulfilment only the final consecration which the death of a great poet gives to his works.

Wilson's successful introduction of Wordsworth was shown by October 1820: "Nor are we not privileged to cherish a better feeling than pride in the belief, or rather knowledge, that We have helped to diffuse Wordsworth's poetry not only over this Island, but the furthest dependencies of the British Empire, and throughout the United States of America".⁷⁹

Wordsworth's pamphlet published in 1816, entitled A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns encouraged another favourable response towards Wordsworth among reviewers. Only Wilson in the BM was totally unfavourable: Wordsworth was impertinent, incompetent, and egoistical in writing the Letter. He defended the Edinburgh Review which Wordsworth had attacked: the poet

with the voice and countenance of a maniac, fixes his teeth in the blue cover of the Edinburgh. He growls over it -shakes it violently to and fro - and at last, wearied out with vain efforts at mastication, leaves it covered over with the drivelling slaver of his impotent rage.⁸⁰

The same inconsistency is shown in early volumes of the BM: 'Wordsworth's pride is like that of a straw-crowned king in Bedlam'.⁸¹ 'Wordsworth often writes like an idiot'.⁸² Wilson's moods affect his judgement, and on a hot day, he describes Wordsworth as 'a bad poet'.⁸³ On another occasion, he writes that, 'We do love rarely to have a slap at the "sole King of rocky Cumberland," - for not unfrequently, - he writes like a demi-man; though, in general it delights us to say, like a demi-god'.⁸⁴ He quotes certain lines which he condemns as 'bald'.⁸⁵

A barking sound the shepherd hears -
A sound as of a dog or fox, -
He stops and searches with his eyes
Among the neighbouring rocks.
And now he thinks he can discern
A stirring in a brake of fern,
From which immediately leaps out
A dog, and, yelling, runs about!!!

The greatness of a poet depends on his work, and Wilson says he will let the people judge the merits of Wordsworth's poetry by putting extracts before the people. His method was to point out the defects and excellencies, but in a spirit of love. The Lyrical Ballads appeared and the reviewers were mainly favourable, except for Jeffrey in the Edinburgh Review. Wilson defended them against attacks, '--They - the Men - pitied us - the Babies - who fancied we saw beauty in those *childish* compositions fit only for the nursery - the LYRICAL BALLADS. Their laughter was long and loud---'.⁸⁶ Also, in another comment, he notes, '--those who wish to judge merely how far he possesses the powers commonly called poetical, will do best to read his LYRICAL BALLADS, and smaller POEMS, where pathos, imagination, and knowledge of human nature, are often presented by themselves, without any obtrusive or argumentative reference to a system'.⁸⁷ In Noctes Thirty Nine the Shepherd adapts the 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads to define poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, regulated by an internal law o' order and beauty"⁸⁸ while North believes

that the Greeks and Romans 'looked on the visible with a satisfaction/That had no need of a remoter charm/Unborrowed from the eye', and that primitive man yearned 'after something more true, more good, more beautiful than himself, or aught that sense subjected to himself, which yet was dimly reflected in himself, and "was the master light of all his seeing"'.⁸⁹

The next major critical reception of Wordsworth's poetry among reviewers was of The Excursion. In the BM Wilson wrote, 'Whoever wishes to understand Mr. Wordsworth's philosophical opinions, will find them developed in their most perfect form in *The Excursion*'.⁹⁰ He praised it as 'full of fine poetry'⁹¹ and 'a moral work of the highest pretensions'.⁹² Lockhart remarked, 'The finest opening to any book of psychology and ethics in the world is that of Wordsworth's *Excursion*'.⁹³ Wilson's admiration of the poem was such that he carried a copy-book for the use of friends, while he himself had committed the poem to memory. The poem abounds with philosophy, and he gave substantial consideration to his review, which appeared in the BM. For Wilson it showed Wordsworth's sensibility in action, and the dark side of human nature, the loneliness, suffering, and despair which is part of the human experience. He commented:

The Excursion is a Series of Poems, all
swimming in the light of poetry; some of
them sweet and simple, some elegant and
graceful, some beautiful and most lovely,
some of "strength and state," some majestic,
some magnificent, some sublime.⁹⁴

His criticism is mixed, and the passages of censure are balanced by those of praise. He praised the best parts of the poem which had also been praised by other reviewers, in particular the Solitary's own story and the Tale of Margaret. Little attention is given to style and construction: 'though it has an opening, it has no beginning; you can discover the middle only by the numerals on the page; and the most serious apprehensions have been very generally entertained that it has no end.'⁹⁵ as Wilson observed. His principal objection to the poem was the lack of religious Christian teaching, although one of the Books of The

Excursion begins with 'a very long and a very noble eulogy'⁹⁶ on the Church Establishment, which led one to the belief that this was a Christian poem. Christianity, as a source of comfort and strength, were not illustrated in the Tale of Margaret. The character of Margaret was one of a Christian, and the picture painted of her and her agonies, Wilson regarded as a libel, not only on her character, but on the character of 'all other poor Christian women in this Christian land.'⁹⁷ It is perhaps the most elaborate picture Wordsworth ever painted of any conflict within any one human heart, and Wilson considered that it is repulsive to every religious mind. This judgement is applicable to almost all the stories in The Excursion. In many of the harangues they have sympathy, but in not one of them is religion the principle of thought and feeling. Inspiration is drawn not from the Book of God, but from the Book of Nature. Never will The Excursion become a bosom book, like The Task or Young's Night Thoughts, both of which deal with revelations and drawn their inspiration from God. He later points out the Two Books of The Excursion, entitled, The Church-Yard among the Mountains, as an example of Wordsworth's 'profound pathos'⁹⁸ when speaking of life surrounded with the images of death, and the atmosphere of calm beauty which the passage seems to reflect.

There was controversy among reviewers concerning characterisation, more specifically the use of a pedlar as a central figure in a philosophic poem. Wilson first criticised the wanderer on grounds of the improbability of having such thoughts and articulation as Wordsworth gave him. He then vindicated the choice of a person of such low degree as Chief of The Excursion. He was pleased he was a Scottish Pedlar, but maintained that he was not a Christian Preacher - at best a 'philosophical divine'⁹⁹ The problem was the choice of a name which Wordsworth had given.

Wilson's method is to take readers through the poem, selecting passages which he felt were of 'surpassing excellence',¹⁰⁰ such as the descriptions of external nature, and the depiction of feeling, passion, and thought. Wordsworth believed that the power of beauty and the serenity of nature was sufficient to comfort and assure people, and it was not

necessary to look for spiritual sources. He outlines the basic theme: three Friends are allowed to wander where they like, 'poetising and philosophising in the solitudes',¹⁰¹ but the purpose of the poem is to use the characters to draw attention to certain truths and illustrate a philosophy of life. It parallels the three stages of man's development, and endorses much of the teachings of his earlier Letter to Mathetes, which explained that the pathway to natural knowledge is obtained by keeping the senses open and the mind active and receptive for the acquisition of experience. Natural human activity and relationships provide the experience from which one learns and at last arrives at Reason, Hope, Imagination, and Power, which are eternal values. Despair is driven out, and Wilson selects a passage from the Fourth Book as an illustration, where the Wanderer urges the Solitary to abandon his despair and turn to a philosophy of Hope and tranquility,

My friend, enough to sorrow you have given;
The purpose of wisdom ask no more;
Be wise and cheerful; and no longer read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.

[931-936]

In the Noctes Ambrosianae No. Thirty, Wilson notes a possible parallel between The Excursion, and Cowper's The Task. He considers Wordsworth has 'far higher enthusiasm of soul'¹⁰² than Cowper, and he writes in a loftier mood, adding that 'Cowper was not ambitious - and Wordsworth's chief fault is ambition.'¹⁰³ Both poets loved nature, but, 'The author of *The Task* loved nature for her own sake - the author of *The Excursion* loves her chiefly for the sake of the power which she inspires within him.'¹⁰⁴ Also, it often required considerable mental effort to understand Wordsworth's poetry, whereas any reader born and brought up in the country could easily appreciate Cowper's poems. Wilson's view was that as we read The Task we can see and hear the images which Cowper presents to us through the mind's eye, which gives the effect of 'gentle and purest pleasure'¹⁰⁵ without requiring much understanding. But Wordsworth's poems appeal to the imagination's eye, and require a more intellectually-minded reader in order to be fully appreciated. It is easy to say which of

the two poems must be the more popular, although each appeals in a different way, depending on the particular mood of the reader. Wilson concludes that The Task would always be a favourite with about all classes of readers, if only for its rural descriptions, but, regarding the rural descriptions of Wordsworth, 'not ten in a thousand are, by constitution or custom, capable to understand their transcendent excellence'¹⁰⁶

His criticism suffers from his swings of mood: The Excursion 'though a great work in itself, is but a portion of a still greater one'¹⁰⁷, yet in the Noctes Ambrosianae he writes 'I confess that The Excursion is the worst poem, of any character, in the English language.--'¹⁰⁸ The poem earned a savage review from Jeffrey, who made little attempt to understand it. His opening words; "This will never do!"¹⁰⁹ summed up the 'absurdity'¹¹⁰ which 'infects the whole substance of the work'¹¹¹ as 'a puerile ambition of singularity engrafted on an unlucky predilection for truisms; and an affected passion for simplicity and humble life, most awkwardly combined with a taste for mystical refinements and all the gorgeousness of obscure phraseology',¹¹² though he does allow Wordsworth 'great powers --'¹¹³

Although Jeffrey was wholly unable to perceive Wordsworth's greatness, he was not alone, in writing of his poetic style, 'This will never do!'¹¹⁴ But if Wordsworth lacked a poetic style of his own, he had a magical power which was unique. Wilson agreed that parts of The Excursion were lofty and mystical but the poem was concerned with high morals and required to be written in a high poetic style. As Wilson observed of Jeffrey,

--Those unmeaning sarcasms fitting the lively and ingenious turn of his mind, accustomed in his profession to a mode of thinking and feeling not very congenial with the simple and stately emotions of Poetry, can have no influence upon spirits capable and worthy of enjoying such Poems as the Lyrical Ballads, and such a poem as The Excursion - while they may afford a suitable amusement to those pert and presuming persons, or those dull and obtuse ones, ---'¹¹⁵

Jeffrey judged by classical traditional standards, and not by his imagination. He was not accustomed to a new dimension of poetry which Wordsworth had opened up. His comments could have no effect on those capable of understanding the Lyrical Ballads and The Excursion. Jeffrey had already spoken previously of Wordsworth and placed him in the first

ranks of Genius. As a critic, he had made innumerable mistakes and shown a perplexing ignorance of Wordsworth's system. If Wordsworth had written badly, so had Milton and Shakespeare in their time, and both Johnson and Hume condemned their writings. But they were not dunces, and neither was Francis Jeffrey. Wordsworth had chosen a sublime theme in The Excursion; Nature is mighty and should be dealt with in a lofty mood. Like Thomson, in his 'Hymn to the Seasons,' which he had so gloriously sung, seeing in all the changes of the rolling year "but the varied god", so Wordsworth, in his Excursion, communing too with the spirit "whose dwelling is the light of setting suns". Both were great men among.

Lights of the world and demigods of fame.

Another tribute occurs in a review of July 1818, "Essays on the Lake School of Poetry", where Wilson praises the White Doe of Rylstone, as a poem which 'exhibits in perfection many of Wordsworth's peculiar beauties, and, it may be, some of his peculiar defects'.¹¹⁶ It was a poem that Wilson felt particularly appealed to readers' imagination. The 'gentle lineaments', 'sober colouring', and 'chastened composition',¹¹⁷ inspired a mood of delight and pleasure in enlightened minds, similar to that experienced in paintings. As an example Wilson quotes the pictures of Raphael, which, he believed, would speak to the soul of some observers while others would turn away 'untouched'¹¹⁸ and unmoved, depending on the degree of sympathy, sensitivity, and taste of the individual. Wilson summarised it as 'a tale written with singularly beautiful simplicity of language, and with a power and pathos that have not been often excelled in English Poetry'.¹¹⁹ In contrast, Jeffrey, in the *Edinburgh Review*, remarked that "This, we think, has the merit of being the very worst poem we saw imprinted in a quarto volume --".¹²⁰

In August 1822 Wilson said that 'Wordsworth's poetry is to him religion; and we venture to say, that it has been felt to be so by thousands. It would be absolute profanation to speak one word against many of his finest breathings; and as the author and promulgator of such divine thoughts, Wordsworth, beyond all poets, living or dead, is felt to be the object of the soul's purest reverence, gratitude, and love.'¹²¹ Another tribute by Wilson appears in his review of Wordsworth's Sonnets and Memorials, August 1822. Wilson admired the sonnet

form, which Wordsworth adopted in 1802, especially the sequence of thirty three sonnets which appeared in April 1820 as the River Duddon. This was accompanied by a Guide, and was a mixture of prose and poetry. Wilson remarks how he is reminded by scenery of the River Duddon, and this inspires him to quote from the volume. They were all 'perfect gems',¹²² and he directs readers' attention to the mechanism of the river as an age analogy: in the second sonnet Wordsworth speaks of the Infant Duddon, in the fourth, of the Boy Duddon, then the Lad Duddon, and, 'ere long from his manly bosom'¹²³, he emits 'a full-grown roar!'¹²⁴ The entire sequence, from the first sonnet to the last, showed Wordsworth's sensibility and evidence of fancy, and Wilson singles out Stepping-Stones, Seathwaite Chapel, and Ulpha Kirk as poems which merited quotations. The effect on the reader was to come 'to know and feel the spirit of this lovely and lonely, of this barren and bounteous land - --'.¹²⁵ Reviewers liked Wordsworth's Duddon volume much better, especially some of the miscellaneous poems and several of the Duddon sonnets. Wilson's understanding is shown in another review of Wordsworth's Sonnets and Memorials (August 1822), in which Wilson even praises his sonnet-sequence Ecclesiastical Sketches. The volume consisted of: 1. Ecclesiastical Sketches and 11. Memorials of a Tour on the Continent. The Memorials described the effect of travel on a poet, and, as Wilson explained, Wordsworth's 'philosophic eye'¹²⁶ transcended the natural objects and showed his imaginative grasp of experience. He produced a series of poems from a Tour on the continent in 1820, and showed the elements that make up his remembered sensation, past and present. The Tour produced one poem, that on the Eclipse of the Sun, which Wilson described as 'one of the finest lyrical effusions of combined thought, passion, sentiment, and imagery, within the whole compass of poetry'.¹²⁷ Wilson pointed out that Wordsworth was trying to instruct through the imagination and the emotions, and to use the knowledge obtained to understand more about the working of the mind. Travelling, with its involvement of solitude and contemplation, had taught him to love what was lovely and revere what was sacred, and to spiritualise all living things. It was the effect of memory and association on Wordsworth's imagination that particularly inspired Wilson's review, but, overall, the poems received poor reviews.

The Ecclesiastical Sketches were published in 1822 and led on from the Memorials. They comprised one hundred and two sonnets, which Wilson described as 'fine Sketches',¹²⁸ on the history of Christianity in England. They were patriotic, and dealt with contemporary issues, such as Catholic emancipation, and showed the church as the centre of social life. Wordsworth's religious spirit was reflected in his concern for spiritual history and truth, and the sonnets were intended to evoke feelings one should experience of holiness, and inspire thoughts that are pure and good. Wilson notes that they are divided into three parts: Part 1 - From the introduction of Christianity into Britain, to the consummation of the Papal dominion; Part 2- To the close of the troubles in the reign of Charles 1st; Part 3 - From the restoration to the present times. The series is connected, and, as Wilson comments, 'never was the alliance between church and state so philosophically illustrated as by this prevailing poet.'¹²⁹ Each Sonnet is a whole, but two or three of the series are blended together; five sonnets are devoted to the Trepidation of the Druid, and another seven to the Romans against the Britons. Wilson felt that when all the sonnets are considered together, the effect of 'great events, and deeds, and minds -- passing processionally before us over the floor of an enchanted stage,'¹³⁰ was 'magnificent'.¹³¹ They were 'peculiarly important'¹³² at that particular time as they indicated the way that the 'meditative mind of genius'¹³³ regarded Christianity and the doctrines.

Although the Ecclesiastical Sketches must be felt to be 'beautiful and majestic',¹³⁴ Wilson believed they were probably best understood by those already familiar with Wordsworth's Sonnets dedicated to Liberty. These show his love for England in the confrontation with France and the value of liberty as a human condition. Moral and religious principles were related, and Wordsworth showed that sensibility also had a moral and religious dimension. When reading these 'splendid series of sonnets,'¹³⁵ Wilson says he is strongly reminded of 'fine verses'¹³⁶ from Cowper, -

A terrible sagacity informs

The poet's heart; he looks to distant storms,

He hears the thunder ere the tempest roar,

The billows ere it breaks upon the shore.

He notes that these Sonnets have been compared with those of Milton, also that Jeffrey considered that Milton's are 'far superior'.¹³⁷ He made an exception to his general attitude regarding Wordsworth's poetry because of their strong connections with the sonnets of Milton. Wilson believed this judgement by Jeffrey was made only to mortify Wordsworth, as, in actual fact, although Milton's sonnets had furnished a model to Wordsworth, he had surpassed his model in thought and expression. It was his view that many of Milton's sonnets owed their success to their hold over readers' minds of the feelings and ideas associated with his character and life, but Wordsworth's sonnets are independent of this personal association, and cover a wider and more varied range. They own their excellence to his ability to show the dignity and sanctity of human life, to expose all delusion, hypocrisy, and error, and to reveal the foundation of true national greatness.

Wilson especially admired the beauty of the language, and considered the composition of the sonnets as 'perfect'.¹³⁸ He felt that the movement and rhythm of the words accurately followed the emotions and moods of the thought. Wordsworth had caught the response of the experience from the soul and showed he had an ear for music, and, as Wilson pointed out, the feeling builds up slowly, then surges forward to a crescendo and a harmony, before falling back, 'according as the thought is beautiful', or 'majestic', or 'sublime'.¹³⁹ As Wilson metaphorically describes, - '---the music flows on like a stream, or rolls like a river, or expands like the sea--'.¹⁴⁰ The effect could best be compared with the following lines:

Through the long drawn aisle and fretted vault,
The pealing anthem swell'd the note of praise.

Wilson described the five volumes of Wordsworth's poetry printed by Longman as 'a gift of inestimable value on a young mind of power, beginning to contemplate human nature with a thoughtful eye',¹⁴¹ and were an ideal present for any student of human nature. The early reviewers of Wordsworth were more concerned with his reputation than individual poems. Wilson in the BM remarked that, 'All the world knows our admiration of Wordsworth, and admits that we have done almost as much as Jeffrey or Taylor to make his

poetry popular among the "educated circles".¹⁴² Wordsworth is now studied over all Scotland, and Wilson notes that 'we have been more affected than we should choose to confess, by the grateful acknowledgement of many a gifted spirit, that to us it was owing that they opened their eyes and their hearts to the ineffable beauty of that poetry in which they had, under our instructions, found not a vain visionary delight, but a strength and succour and consolation, breathed as from a shrine in the silence and solitude of nature ---'.¹⁴³ In defiance of prejudices, and "the world's dread laugh"¹⁴⁴ he used the BM to educate readers to an understanding and appreciation of the benefits of Wordsworth's poems by shaping their minds and awakening feelings within themselves of beauty and truth through the appeal of the imagination. This is the Wordsworth whom the poetic Quaker couple, the Howitts revere: 'They quote, indeed, scarcely any poetry but Wordsworth's - for in it, above all other, their quiet, and contemplative, and meditative spirit seems to repose in delight.'¹⁴⁵ As he noted, '--it would have been so had we never lived, *but not so soon*--'¹⁴⁶ As a kindred spirit, sharing a similar moral nature and principles, Wilson was a natural and sympathetic critic of Wordsworth. His purpose was not so much to enhance Wordsworth's fame but to indicate clearly why he believed Wordsworth was a great poet. He was great because he was 'the benefactor of humanity, who has purified its passions by loftiest thoughts and noblest sentiments -- and showing how the soul, in ebb and flow, and when its tide is at full, may be at once as strong and as serene as the sea.'¹⁴⁷ The voice of the 'awakened and enlightened land'¹⁴⁸ now use the language not merely of admiration but of reverence, and of love and gratitude for the power with which he felt the joy offered us in nature, in the simple affections and duties, and because of the way he shows this joy and makes us share it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wilson and Coleridge

'No man was ever more beloved by his friends - and among them were many of the great as well as the good - than the poet Coleridge'¹ so wrote Wilson of Coleridge shortly after his death in 1834. '---he alone perhaps of all men that ever lived was always a poet - in all his moods - and they were many - *inspired*.'² That he was a genius, all his admirers, and all poetic minds knew. 'It has been understood by all who know what poetry is; and all that future ages can do for his fame, will be to extend it.'³ Other contemporary critics were similarly enthusiastic: Thomas Arnold considered him 'a very great man indeed--'⁴; J. Hare, '---that Coleridge is the true sovereign of modern English thought';⁵ and J.S. Mill claimed that his is a seminal mind. Certainly the myriad-mindedness of Coleridge as a critic, poet, and philosopher, shaped much of Wilson's philosophy, and influenced his own position as a literary critic, and he pays a compliment in BM to the 'original genius'⁶ of Coleridge, whom he admired and respected for the nobility and beauty of his character as well as his writings.

There is no evidence as to when Wilson first met Coleridge, but it is believed they originally met in 1808 when De Quincey and Coleridge were on a visit to Wordsworth, the introduction being made in a room being used as a study by Coleridge. In September 1808 Coleridge invited Eliza Nevins, Wilson and Mrs Wilson to Grasmere, and at Christmas 1809 Coleridge, Wordsworth and De Quincey paid Wilson a visit. Wilson contributed to Coleridge's short-lived periodical, The Friend, with an article appearing 14 December 1809 as a tribute to Wordsworth's Letter of Mathetes. Wordsworth had read to Wilson on 1 May 1809 the White Doe and Coleridge's Christabel, and on 31 August 1814, in a letter to the publisher John Murray, Coleridge referred to Wilson. In January 1816 Wilson writes to his wife from Bowness, while on a walking tour, that he had called in to Coleridge's house at Pooley Bridge in passing. Finally, in the Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, there is a reference to a visit by Wilson and Lockhart to Scott at Abbotsford, 3 October 1818, during which Wilson mentioned in conversation with Scott a report that Coleridge was considering

a translation of Faust. There is, therefore, evidence that Wilson was familiar with the poems of Coleridge, and had met Coleridge, and was a personal friend. Given these circumstances it is a matter of considerable perplexity why he should choose to write the notorious review of Biographia Literaria of October 1817.

Wilson's treatment of Coleridge as a romantic poet in BM gave him the opportunity to describe what particularly interested him, the role of the imagination, and to moralise on the imaginative process. Coleridge had an impact on all who met him, especially as a conversationalist. In his essay, 'Anglimania - Our Two Panniers', Wilson remarked that often, listening to him, and looking on his forehead, he had been reminded of the 'noble words, - not of Byron, but of Waller, "The Palace of the Soul"'.⁷ He added, 'Like St. Peter's or Pandemonium, it was ablaze with light. Such, and so sudden was the splendour. But not with the "false lustre" bedazzling the eyes of superstition - nor with the "permissive glory" allowed to illuminate the hall of the Fallen Angels. Holy the light - as the music was holy, that "rose like a steam of rich, distilled perfume," and love, and wonder, and awe, were inspired by the radiance, the incense, and the Anthem.'⁸ His thoughts spilled out, and the power possessed by Coleridge over the 'fair ideas that came and went at his command'⁹ Wilson likened to that exercised by the pigeon-fanciers in India who let loose a multitude of pigeons, all flying with perfect regularity and without confusion, yet all under the control of their master. H.N. Coleridge observed, 'His thoughts are, if we may say so, as the radii of a circle.'¹⁰ The width of his mind reflected the intellectual influence of his reading; he was learned in all the learning of the Egyptians as well as the Greek and Romans, and his scientific knowledge could puzzle Sir Humphrey Davey. He had 'learned a seraphic language, which all the while that it is English, is as grand as Greek, and as soft as Italian'.¹¹ His imagination was 'as exhaustless as the sun',¹² and he had the gift of discoursing in perfection. While he is discoursing, the world loses its commonplace; this was his greatness, and his power, to create new worlds by the use of the imagination. As Wilson observed, 'Coleridge is the alchymist that in his crucible melts down hours to moments - and lo! diamonds sprinkled on a plate of gold.'¹³ In his rhapsodical style, Wilson exclaims,

'What a world this would be were all its inhabitants to fiddle like Paganini, ride like Ducrow, discourse like Coleridge, and do everything else in a style of equal perfection!'¹⁴ He is also complimentary in the Noctes, where North comments, 'I have heard Coleridge. That man is entitled to speak on till Doomsday - or rather the genius within him - for he is inspired. Wind him up, and away he goes, discoursing most excellent music - without a discord - full, ample, inexhaustible, serious and divine!'¹⁵

Wilson described Coleridge as a poet and a metaphysician, as was Wordsworth. In his Preface 1826, Wilson noted the great writers of the age, 'Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, and others'¹⁶ and their treatment by what he called inferior critics. He links them as poets of the Lake School, who had new concepts of poetry. He pointed out that Wordsworth 'remonstrates, rather angrily'¹⁷ with the public's 'obstinate ignorance'¹⁸ that placed himself, Coleridge, and Southey, together in the New School, but he accepted that he and Coleridge did hold the same principles of the nature of poetry. Among the Lyrical Ballads, he admitted 'the three finest composition of his illustrious Compeer'¹⁹. In this connection, Wilson made a certain claim, that Coleridge was the minor poet; Wordsworth, 'far beyond one and all of all other men, has illustrated the Faith of Universal Feeling. In Coleridge there are many fine touches of the same attributive Fancy; but his conceptive power, though strong and bright, was not equal to that of his Master - "that mighty Orb of Song."²⁰

From Coleridge's genius came the principles and elements of his own composition in prose and poetry. It was when he put the thoughts from his 'inspired'²¹ lips into poetry that he was interesting. His prose was not good, and he was condemned as a writer of prose books; in April, 1827, in the Noctes North says to the Shepherd: 'James, you don't know S.T. Coleridge - do you? He writes but indifferent books, begging his pardon; witness his Friend, his Lay Sermons, and latterly, his Aids to Reflection; but he becomes inspired by the sound of his own silver voice, and pours out wisdom like the sea.'²² The first number of BM contained Wilson's leading article, Observations on Coleridge's Biographia Literaria. It was

a time when Coleridge himself was not popular: Wilson noted, 'In Scotland few know or care anything about him';²³ he was a philosophical poet whose views were not understood by the general public, and he had already attacked the Scottish critics, including Francis Jeffrey, and had been criticised in return. Blackwood had originally sent the Biographia to Wilson in the Highlands, and the latter had written and lost the first draft of his review of the work, along with Byron's Lament of Tasso. Possibly the loss of the manuscript accounted for the ferocity of the attack, but a more probable cause was Coleridge's abuse of Jeffrey, with whom Wilson was friendly and for whom he intended writing an article on Coleridge's poetry for the Whig Edinburgh Review. Lockhart remarked in Peter's Letters of 1819, "This is, indeed, the only one of all the various sins of this Magazine for which I am at a loss to discover - not an apology - but a motive."²⁴ Similarly, Andrew Lang wrote in a note to his Life and Letters of J.G. Lockhart, "The real motive for the attack on Coleridge was too vague to be traced, and too childish to be revealed here."²⁵ Wilson finds fault with Coleridge for the following reasons: he rambles capriciously; he possesses an inveterate and diseased egotism; insane vanity; in Scotland few know or care anything about him; he lacks lucidity and consistency in his ideas; he knows less than nothing of Kant; he shows numerous political inconsistencies; he lacks personal dignity, and self-respect; he cannot deny that he has abandoned his wife and children. "We have not been speaking," the article concludes, "in the cause of Literature only, but we conceive in the cause of Morality and Religion---."²⁶ Coleridge threatened reprisals, and considered bringing a lawsuit against BM, but it did not stop a relationship developing between Coleridge and the magazine, and in 1821 he was established as a contributor.

Two months after the attack of October appeared in BM a Letter to the Reviewer of Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, by "J.S.", presumably the work of either Wilson or Lockhart. The author disclaimed any personal knowledge of Coleridge, but remarks that he writes "from a love I have for generous and fair criticism, and a hate to everything which appeared personal, and levelled against the man and not his subject - and your writing is glaringly so."²⁷ This defence was also written along with a burlesque of Christabel a few

months later, and both widely believed to be the work of Wilson. There is a reference in the Noctes to the Biographia, where Wilson quotes the principle that thoughts are imperishable.

North: It is not safe to say, James, that any one single thought that ever was in the mind is forgotten.--- Why may not the thought, I ask, return - or rather, rise up again on the spirit from which it has never flown, but lain hushed in that mysterious dormitory, where ideas sleep ---.²⁸

Coleridge, in the Biographia Literaria, had written, "It is probable that all thoughts are in themselves imperishable; and that if the intelligent faculty should be rendered more comprehensive, it would require only a different and apportioned organisation - the body celestial instead of the body terrestrial - to bring before every human soul the collective experience of its whole past existence."²⁹ This suggests that Wilson was familiar with the Biographia Literaria, and had read it.

Similarly, in April 1818, Wilson shows the extraordinary unpredictability of his character and of his criticism alike when in the third of Timothy Tickler's Letters, he attacks Jeffrey for his treatment of Coleridge in the Edinburgh Review: "Your behaviour towards Mr. Coleridge has been very far from being either candid or manly."³⁰ Again, in a review of the Works of Charles Lamb in August of the same year, Wilson twice makes passing mention of Coleridge, praising his drama Remorse, but elsewhere referring to him less flatteringly as "Mr. Coleridge, a man whose opinions always bear the stamp of genius, but are not, or seldom, fantastic and sophist exaggerations."³¹ These references are reminiscent of Wilson's attack and praise of Wordsworth in the early years of BM, and show more of the tone of his criticism than the character of Coleridge. Meanwhile Coleridge had been lecturing on Shakespeare in London, and the astute businessman, William Blackwood, recognised the advantage of these lectures for the magazine. Writing to P.G. Patmore, on 29 January 1818, he comments, "I perceive by the newspapers that Coleridge is about to deliver a course of lectures. Could you furnish us an account of his first three lectures for our February number, and of his first three on Shakespeare for the March no?. If you think so - charge the price of the course of lectures to the Magazine."³² The editor, that is Wilson, wrote similarly on the

same occasion, "I have just to add that I am very anxious to have a full account of these three lectures of Coleridge's that treat of the drama, if no other."³³ Further flattering tributes from Lockhart may have encouraged Coleridge to contribute to a periodical that eighteen months previously had grossly libelled him, but another critic, Dykes Campbell, suggested financial needs formed the chief motive. In the spring of 1819, Coleridge wrote to Blackwood on how to conduct his magazine, and in the letter he demanded higher remuneration than that allocated the ordinary contributor. Lockhart and Blackwood replied, and Coleridge sent to Lockhart his Letter on Zapolya, addressed 'To the author of Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk, from his obliged S.T. Coleridge'. The Blackwood group ignored Coleridge's request for the suppression of personality in their periodical, and in the article On the Cockney School of Poetry No. VI, October, 1819, they combine flattery for their friends and contempt for their enemies when they declared that 'Hunt and Hazlitt have sucked the brains of Charles Lamb.' 'Mr. Coleridge, too, used to be plundered in this way - and one evening of his fine, rich, overflowing, monologue would amply furnish out a lecture on poetry, or anything else, at the Surrey Institution.'³⁴ On 10 January 1820, Lamb wrote to Coleridge, "Why you should refuse twenty guineas per sheet for Blackwood's, or any other magazine, passes my poor comprehension."³⁵ The reference is to Coleridge's first contribution to BM, which appeared in the number of November 1819: Fancy in Nubibus. A Sonnet, composed on the sea chest, and Character of Sir Thomas Brown as a writer, a specimen of the author's Marginalia. Thus within two years after the review of Biographia Literaria, Coleridge was contributing to BM. A second contribution was the publication of part of a private letter, without Coleridge's consent, from Coleridge to Lockhart, in September 1820. This was followed by another article within nine months, in October 1821, of twenty pages in the shape of five letters, and, in January 1822, The History and Gests of Maxilian, which earned a compliment from North by way of postscript. Only a single page of his writing ever again appeared in the magazine: The Old Man's Sigh. A Sonnet, introduced by a paragraph of prose, What is an English Sonnet? June 1832. But his enthusiasm for the magazine remained constant; on 20 October 1829 he wrote to the publisher, 'Blackwood and Sir Walter's novels have been my comforters in many a sleepless night when I should but for them have been comfortless.'³⁶ In another

letter of 15 May 1830 he speaks of his "public avowal of my admiration for your 'Maga'--³⁷

And in a third letter of 26 May 1832 he 'avows and asserts' his conviction:

In the long, never-flagging Height and Sustainedness of irony, in the continuity, variety, and strength of wing, and in the value, the worth, the deep importance of the moral and political truths which it has streamed forth with eloquent wisdom "Blackwood's Magazine" is an unprecedented Phenomenon in the world of letters, and forms the golden - alas! the only - remaining link between the periodical press and the enduring literature of Great Britain.³⁸

It was when Coleridge's genius was allowed to develop unheeded that the unique quality of his poetry was felt. Wilson praises Coleridge for the musicality of his poetry, commenting, 'The whole essence of his poetry is more akin to music than that of any other poetry we have met with'³⁹, and for its ethereal imagination. The Shepherd in Noctes No. Fourteen speaks on Coleridge's poetry:

oh! man, he's an unyerthly writer and gies Superstition sae beautifu' a countenance, that she wiles folk on wi' her, like so many bairns, into the flowery but fearfu' wildernesses, where sleeping and wauking seem a' ae thing, and the very soul within us wonders what has become o' the every-day world, and asks hersel what creation is this that wavers and glimmers, and keeps up a bonnie wild musical sough, like that o' swarming bees, spring-startled birds, and the voice of a hundred streams, some wimpling awa' over the Elysian meadows, and ithers roaring at a distance frae the clefts o' mount Abora. But is't true they hae made him the Bishop of Barbadoes?⁴⁰

There was none of the obscurity of metaphysics in his poetry, and Wilson praised the poems for their imagery and their sentiment, but while 'almost all eyes communicate with some inner sense of beauty',⁴¹ this characteristic of creating over all the poetry a spirit of delight and love has distanced him from the public. Wilson is concerned with the effect of the poems, and the readers' response to a mood, and he advises readers to 'read The Ancient Mariner, The Nightingale and Genevieve'. In the first, you shudder at the superstition of the

sea - in the second, you thrill with the melodies of the woods, - in the third, earth is like heaven; for you are made to feel that

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,

Whatever stirs this mortal frame,

All are but ministers of Love,

And feed his sacred flame! - 42

His Love Poems, 'though full of fondness and tenderness'⁴³ were not for the multitude; they were either 'so spiritualised as to be above their sympathies, or so purified as not to meet them.'⁴⁴ The emotions in which he deals do not belong to the class of what are properly called the passions. Wilson asks, 'Where in poetry is there another such Lay of Love as Genevieve?'⁴⁵

There was further high praise in BM in October 1819, attributed to J. G. Lockhart, of Coleridge's poetic qualities: he is 'a poet of a most noble class - a poet most original in his conceptions - most masterly in his execution - above all things a most inimitable master of the language of poetry.'⁴⁶ His mixture of the awful and gentle graces of conception, his dreamy phantasies, his 'music of words and magic of numbers',⁴⁷ made him, in Wilson's judgement, stand absolutely alone among all the poets of the most poetical age. Wilson repeats Lockhart's line, that 'Mr. Coleridge is the prince of superstitious poets',⁴⁸ and the writer noted that 'fear and wonder are the attendant spirits of Coleridge.'⁴⁹ The power of his poetry was not of 'high imagination', not 'teeming fancy', not of 'overflowing sentiment',⁵⁰ but poetry of the senses strung to imagination. It lies in the senses, but they are senses breathed upon by imagination, and having a sympathy, but not a union, with the imagination, like the beauty of flowers. In Milton there is a union between sense and imagination, and their actions are blended into one. In Coleridge what is borrowed from imagination or affection is brought to sense - sense is his sphere. Like his contemporaries, Wilson praises the Ancient Mariner, Christabel and Love as the best of Coleridge's poems.

The inconsistency of Wilson's criticism of Coleridge is seen by the condemnation of the poet in October 1823:

North: Who, think ye, Tickler, is to be the new editor of the Quarterly? Coleridge?

Tickler: Not so fast. The contest lies, I understand, between him and O'doherty.

That is the reason the Adjutant has not been with us tonight. He is up canvassing.

The Opium Eater: Mr. Coleridge is the last man in Europe to conduct a periodical work. His genius none will dispute; but I have traced him through German literature, poetry, and philosophy; and he is, sir, not only a plagiarist, but, sir, a thief, a bone fide most unconscientious thief. I mean no disrespect to a man of surpassing talents. Strip him of his stolen foods, and you will find good clothes of his own below. Yet, except as a poet, he is not original; and if he ever became Editor of the Quarterly (which I repeat is impossible) then will I examine his pretensions, and shew him up as imposter. Of Shakespeare it has been said, in a very good song, that 'the thief of all thieves was a Warwickshire thief'; but Shakespeare stole from Nature, and she forbore to prosecute. Coleridge has stolen from a whole host of his fellow-creatures, most of them poorer than himself; and I pledge myself I am bound over to appear against him. If he plead to the indictment, he is a dead man - if he stand mute, I will press him to death, under three hundred and fifty pound weight of German metaphysics.

North: Perhaps it is young Coleridge - a son or a nephew.⁵¹

It was his review of Coleridge's Poetical Works in October 1834 that showed Wilson's highly developed critical faculty, and was his best contribution to Coleridgean criticism, as well as showing his atonement for the animosity of his Observations on Coleridge's Biographia Literaria of October 1817. It is a long review and well written in a commonsense and practical tone, and concentrates more on the imaginative power of the creative process rather than individual poems. Also, like other contemporary reviews, the BM stresses the musical quality of Coleridge's verse, especially as they are shown in these poems. Wilson pays attention to Coleridge's character, describing him as 'an admirable poet'

and 'one of the most amiable of men,'⁵² which shows the moral rehabilitation Coleridge has undergone. Coleridge had been recognised as a genius, and in his review he only needed to extend the poet's fame. Like Wordsworth, Wilson regretted that Coleridge had written his best work before his thirtieth year. The 'delightful'⁵³ volumes are divided into compartments, Juvenile Poems, Sibylline Leaves, Miscellaneous Poems, and Dramas, and they were reviewed according to the mood of the moment and do not obey any particular order. Wilson also agreed that 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and 'Christabel', were Coleridge's most significant poems; they were both "dreams" and he comments, 'How many worlds, within the imagination of a great poet, are involved in the wide world of sleep!' ⁵⁴ Fraser's Magazine called the 'Rime' 'that supernatural romance inspired with human interest, which eclipses all other attempts'⁵⁵, while the Edinburgh Review maintained that 'the supernatural imagery of ... "Christabel" ... is something of a peculiar and exquisite cast which stands unrivalled in modern poetry'.⁵⁶ Wilson in BM, distinguished between the two poems by commenting that '...Christabel is a fragment of the beautiful ... and the Ancient Mariner a whole of the sublime'⁵⁷, but he emphasised what they have in common when he claimed that 'there is one region in which Imagination has ever loved to walk - now in glimmer, and now in gloom - and now even in daylight - but it must be a nightlike day - where Coleridge surpasses all poets but Shakespeare - nor do we fear to say, - where he equals Shakespeare. That region is the preternatural'.⁵⁸ In Coleridge's relation to the Lyrical Ballads, Wilson noted that Coleridge had fallen far short of the completion of his 'magnificent design'⁵⁹, but from other causes than want of power, in comparison to Wordsworth who had 'gloriously achieved his gracious object'.⁶⁰

The ability to imagine other worlds, and give an inward vision an external form by the imagination, led to the description of Coleridge as an original poet, and for one reviewer to call his poetry 'tumultuous and violent'⁶¹. His mastery over the supernatural, and his interest in dreams, showed the role of the unconscious in creative imagination. Wilson noted that when a poet's dream is put into poetry, it is as obedient to laws as a philosopher's meditation put into prose. Though it is made up of the 'wild and wonderful'⁶², the

imagination still structures and builds according to inner laws which are as logically consistent as those contrived from philosophical speculation.

In his review of October 1834, Wilson described the 'Ancient Mariner' as 'a wonderful poem'⁶³ and a 'haunted dream'.⁶⁴ It was the poem from which an idea of the poetical genius of Coleridge could be gathered, apart from a perusal of the whole of his other works. Above all the poems with which he was acquainted, this was a poem which was not capable of being described, analysed, or criticised. Wilson points out that the poem must be looked at through the Ancient Mariner's eyes. Readers must see what he sees and feel what he feels, as if they had seen real spectres, and were for ever to be haunted. The poem is coloured by the mood of the mariner and his feelings, and although he belongs to another world, that of the supernatural, this world may yet be natural if it moves the emotions. It is nature's voice that inspires an inner response, and therefore the ideas evoked are not necessarily un-natural. Wilson disagrees with Wordsworth over two issues raised in the poem, namely, that the imagery is too laboriously accumulated, and that the Ancient Mariner is throughout a passive figure. He comments on the essence of tenderness, the sorrowful way with which the Ancient Mariner dwells upon the image of the pious bird of good omen, and the 'convulsive shudder'⁶⁵ with which he narrated the treacherous issue. The soul itself is involved, and Wilson shows that human sufferings are painted in the poem with a power far transcending those of any other poet. Coleridge has 'concentrated in a few words the essence of torment - and showed soul made sense, and living but in baked dust and blood.'⁶⁶ From the true tragedy of Remorse and of Repentance together is wrought a conversion, and out of perfect contrition, coming from the extremities of suffering, is resignation and peace. He summarises the poem as a magic spell of remorse, the effect of magic being created by the melody of the charmed words, and by the splendour of the unnatural apparitions. But there is also a moral dimension, the Christian hope that confession may soften other hearts or awaken them from the carelessness of cruelty. As Wilson pointed out, the Ancient Mariner throughout the poem is passive, but 'in that very passiveness - which is powerlessness - lies the whole meaning of the poem'⁶⁷ Wilson's philosophical interpretation of the poem in this

later review shows a considerable departure from the criticism written when Coleridge was still alive.

Of all the author's productions, the one which was most similar to the Ancient Mariner is Christabel, which Wilson calls, 'the most exquisite of all his inspirations; and, incomplete as it is, affects the imagination more magically than any other poem concerning the preternatural.'⁶⁸ It was described by Byron as 'a singularly wild and beautiful' poem,⁶⁹ and by Scott that 'it had inspired the "Lay"'.⁷⁰ Wilson comments, 'Christabel is indeed, what Byron said it was, a singularly wild and original poem'.⁷¹ It was a 'dream'⁷² and no one should read it unless familiar with visionary and superstitious reveries. If one did not experience a strange and harrowing feeling of dread then the soul was made of 'impenetrable stuff'⁷³. It shows the mystery of Fear, and was, Wilson believed, 'a new species of poetry and the specimen was felt to be perfect.'⁷⁴ The music of the verse was likened to some new instrument, constructed on a dream of the harps, on which in forgotten ages the old harpers played. The meaning of the poem is not known; as Wilson points out, it is a mystery which even Coleridge himself could not have explained. It is not possible to explain a mood of superstition, yet there is an impression of intense realism which awakes from the reader the true emotions of love and fear for Christabel. 'What the dread, and what the danger, you know not, but that they are not from the common things of this world.'⁷⁵ The strain on these highly wrought feelings is intensified by a few sprinklings of dubious words as Wilson points out, and the emotion is heightened by these casual touches which seem insignificant in themselves. The impression and effect of the character of Geraldine is carefully created and built up; the stranger, gliding in the moonlight from the wood, is guided to the chamber of the unsuspecting Christabel. Nothing can be better contrasted than Christabel and Geraldine - both exquisite, but both different: as Wilson notes, 'what witch, at once so foul and so fair, so felt to be fatal in her fearful beauty, an apparition of bliss and of bale - as the stately Lady Geraldine? What angel - in her dread so delicate - in her distress so graceful - as she - the Dove of her own Dream - fascinated to death by that hissing serpent - like the meek, pure, pious Christabel - whose young virgin life has been wholly dedicated to her Father and her God?'⁷⁶ The broken accents of Geraldine are ambiguous, and Wilson concentrates on the

images which evoke the mood and atmosphere; - the stumble on the threshold; the moaning of the mastiff; the flicker of the flame from the dying embers in the hall; the sacred emblem of the silver lamp that is 'fastened to an angel's feet';⁷⁷ those and other signs which are in conjunction more ominous 'all sink down our heart for sake of the sinless Christabel',⁷⁸ - all seem to prepare the reader for some coming shock - 'a horror hinted, not revealed.'⁷⁹ Wilson felt that Coleridge could never have put his conception of the rest of the poem into words adequate for it, and he hoped that it would for ever remain 'a Fragment - and for the sake of all that is most beautiful, let it remain so for ever'⁸⁰ belonging to the design of the original plan of the Lyrical Ballads. This was the reason for the subsequent review he wrote in 1838 in which he brought out, in an analysis of Martin Tupper's inferior completion of Christabel, the immense superiority of Coleridge's work, with its dim revelation, mysteriously diffused of, 'a fearful being that all at once is present "beyond the reaches of our souls" - something fiendish in what is most fair, and blasting in what is most beautiful.'⁸¹ Wilson noted that Mr Tupper had been praised by critics whose judgements were highly respected, and he concluded, 'If our censure be undeserved - let our copious quotations justify themselves, and be our condemnation'.⁸²

Although Coleridge shows an extraordinary attention to natural phenomena in the Ancient Mariner, he was never an observer of nature like his friends Wordsworth and Charles Lamb. His close association with Wordsworth, and his lengthy stay in the Lake District, suggest he is often considered as a nature poet, and Wilson brings forward a few selected poems to show that he, too, is conversant with nature. But for Coleridge the nature imagery was more as an aid for the expression of creative thoughts; the spirit of nature did not touch him deeply, only as a vehicle for his metaphysical speculations which had more significance for him than his early poetry. Except for his earliest poetry, he does not treat nature as a theme; his imagination was too vivid and extensive to particularism on a direct response to nature, and a prolonged eulogy based on the beauty of the earth, sea, and sky.

Wilson wrote in a manner of inviting readers to share with him the pleasures of the poems; it is an appraisal, not an analytical criticism, and a response to the mood and feeling evoked by the poems. Throughout the remarks on the early poems his strong humour and

commonsense appears. If you do not enjoy certain of Coleridge's juvenile productions, Lines to a Beautiful Spring in a Village and Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath, for example, - 'If you do not feel that such compositions as these, unpretentious and humble as they are, are nevertheless the finest poetry, you had better burn your books at once - all your books of the bards - and confine yourself to practical chemistry.'⁸³ Lines to a Beautiful Spring in a Village, Wilson felt, reflected the character of a true poet which was recognised in the whole tone of his inner being, and was in musical harmony with the rhythm and motion of the natural order. The poem was like 'music by moonlight'⁸⁴, although Wilson considered some of the lines could be improved in expression, but overall they showed the mood of a young man awakening to the beauty of nature. Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement, This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison, and The Nightingale, all reveal the same delight in nature; Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement struck a personal and rural note but suggested he was not on intimate terms with natural objects. His genius was not local, and he was not inspired or disturbed by them to seek a higher knowledge of nature. In the poem, This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison, the spirit of nature had descended on him and he saw with what Sir Joshua Reynolds would have called 'a dilate eye'; as Wilson noted in the creative process, 'The poet's heart and imagination minister to each other.'⁸⁵ The Nightingale illustrated the law of association more philosophically than by Hartley or Brown, and all these early poems showed the kind of communion Coleridge had with nature. Fears in Solitude was inspired with the true Wordsworthian spirit, and the power of the versification was felt in all its movements as it obeyed the commands of gentle, or a grand, or an indignant mood. It revealed that Coleridge's patriotism was only part of a wider love of humanity. Wilson points out that it is a moral poem and the evil depicted originated in ourselves, but can be overcome by love. The poet tells readers some bitter truths, which can be overcome. There is some stately and sustained beauty, and readers are raised by the pealing music. The Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni showed that Coleridge had reached the true sublime, and was a poem which was not equalled by Milton or Wordsworth. It 'brings our whole capacity of adoration into power, and we join mighty Nature in praise and worship of God.'⁸⁶

Of the Odes, Wilson felt that there was not a truly great ode in our language, but there were many noble ones, and these included the three odes of Coleridge - Dejection, France, The Departing Year. He presently contradicts himself and suggests that Collins' Ode to Freedom is sublime and worthy of being called 'the only truly great ode in the English language'.⁸⁷ Wordsworth's Ode on the Immortality of the Soul is excluded because the emotion does not move the reader sufficiently; it is a good lyrical poem, but it is not an ode. Wilson bases his criticism on the classical pattern which did not really suit Coleridge's ornate style. He measures them against the classical standard, and concludes that they all lack the depth, truth, and sincerity of passion without which there cannot be a 'great ode'. Wilson does not usually indulge in the distinction between the fancy and the imagination, which for Coleridge was a philosophical point, but in his criticism of Dejection he indulges in some Coleridgeana. The opening lines, he felt, especially the familiar 'Well!', were not in keeping with the character of what is, or ought to be, that of an ode. He notes that there was a wild passage about the Wind, which nobody would have thought of writing, or could have written, but Coleridge. It was 'strangely touching', but was 'too quaint for a composition of such high and solemn character'.⁸⁸ Wilson points that the entire mood of the poem is a dream, both day dreams and night dreams, a state of mind which had a profound significance for Coleridge as he believed poetry itself was an expression of an inner vision manifested in an outward form by the imagination. The dreams are elevated by lofty thoughts, but on their return to earth they are of a higher and holier power because they are etherealised. There was one 'rich and rare passage' where Coleridge had 'expounded most philosophically, and illustrated most poetically, a great and universally-acknowledged Truth'.⁸⁹ Wilson quotes part of the Ode, including the lines

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
 And in our life alone does nature live;
 Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!

But the "higher mood"⁹⁰ which should lift the reader is not sustained, and although many parts are entirely beautiful, something is wanting and the Ode is not 'a sincere, satisfying, and consummate Whole.'⁹¹

The Ode to the Departing Year is a less personal ode, or, rather, the poet's individuality is absorbed in his patriotism which, in turn, is channelled towards the wider cause of freedom. It was written at the close of 1796, and Coleridge lamented the political events of the previous year and foresaw fatal consequences from this in the present. The Ode prophesied, 'in anguish of spirit, the downfall of the country',⁹² and Wilson believed that no 'Great Ode' could have such an argument; it is 'false and hollow, and altogether elusive.'⁹³ He noted that the poem is spoken in the character of a national prophet, and, in order to utter prophetic words at all, the poet must be endowed with total unity of being and truth, otherwise the tone of the poem fails to carry conviction. The words needed passion and a 'mighty incantation'⁹⁴ to evoke them; they had to 'sound as if they had the power to pierce the grave and force it to give up its dead.'⁹⁵ Some lines, Wilson felt, should be omitted as they were written in a spirit of false enthusiasm and extravagance. Wilson quotes the following passage as an example:

The voice had ceased, the vision fled;
Yet still I gasped and reeled with dread.
-----See! the startling wretch's head
Lies pillowed on a brother's corse!

Despite these faults, Wilson concludes that 'there are many flashes of elevated thought in the midst of smoky clouds whose turbulence is not grandeur.'⁹⁶ One strain, he believed, and one only, approaches the sublime:

Departing Year! 'twas on no earthly shore
My soul beheld thy vision! Where alone,
-----Hark! how wide Nature joins her groans below
Rise, God of Nature! rise.

Shelley pronounced France to be 'the finest English Ode of modern times,'⁹⁷ and Wilson agreed, unless Gray and Collins belong to modern times, but it was certainly a 'noble

composition.⁹⁸ The title France was a misnomer as it was really an Ode to Liberty and a palinode. He quotes the entire poem, which he believed had never been printed in full in any periodical, and he writes in a tone suggesting that the reader is as much an observant critic as himself. Wilson points out that the emotion is circular like music, the feelings evoked by the poem move the reader full circle, back to where he first started, on the sea-cliff's edge and between the elements of the sea and sky. It is passionate rather than imaginative, and does not reflect the highest mood of the imagination. The heroic majesty of the oracular voice did not come from the soul itself, as occurred in Wordsworth's Intimations of Immortality, but from Coleridge's presence in the poem. It was too personal, and Coleridge appears as the most prominent personage, rather than choosing to immerse his personality in the creative spirit as observed in an ode of the highest kind. Coleridge's nephew, H.N. Coleridge, in his Quarterly Review, 1834, described France as 'the most complete, most finished as a whole, but not equal in depth, in fancy, to "The Departing Year", or "Dejection"'.⁹⁹ Wilson concludes that he may not have done justice to his criticism of the Odes, but the chief cause lay in his personal admiration of Coleridge's genius which was too original to be cast into an imitation of the classical mould. His exuberance and enthusiasm take control and offset the essential feeling of delight and inner peace, which was essential to evoke from the poems in order to obtain a sympathetic response from the reader.

Although Wilson pays tribute to Coleridge's drama, The Remorse, pointing out some passages of beauty, and even tenderness, accompanied by the music of the versification which never ceases to charm, he is less complimentary to Coleridge in a conversation of 15 September 1843, printed by Viscount Cranbrook more than forty years later. In this conversation he remarks upon the inferiority of The Remorse and Zepoyla as dramas and praises the magnificent translation of Schiller's play, Wallenstein; he declares, too, that in exquisite tenderness and beauty nothing approached in his poetry to Genevieve; and most important of all, in connection with another aspect of Coleridge's genius, his conversational powers, he refers to the misunderstanding between Wordsworth and Coleridge:

Poor Coleridge fancied he could do everything, and his designs and plans were tremendous. He projected a 'Dictionary', a 'Grammar', a 'Great Epic Poem on the Fall of Jerusalem', a 'System of Philosophy', and he who was wholly without it actually intended to write a 'Treatise on Method'. None of these ever even commenced; and they were but a part of the vast projects in his mind - amongst others a conclusive work on Theology. The sphere where he was great was in conversation, and that he loved when he could find attentive listeners.¹⁰⁰

Another speaker interrupts to say that Wordsworth "declared that he never heard him converse without silently saying to himself, 'Wonderful'." Wilson replies:

"He was indeed so far as those flaws and inconsistencies in argument are not observed and detected, but it is very different when the same thing is put into writing. Coleridge's weakness was an extreme love of sympathy, and it was what he thought a want of this in the more austere character of Wordsworth that led to the coolness between them. ---He was too dignified and self-dependent a character for Coleridge who always required sympathy. --It was this weakness and not pride or vanity, which led him to delight in talking; and when he had an attentive hearer he would enlarge on every subject with enthusiasm but if there were the slightest apathy or carelessness displayed, it was curious to see how his voice died away at once. And yet I am convinced this was not from love of display, but of having other minds in communion, as it were, with his own; and when he felt that they were so, he would impart to every object of conversation a hue and tinge of beauty which could not be surpassed--".¹⁰¹

Clearly, Wilson the conversationalist is even more unpredictable than Wilson the literary critic. It is curious that his criticism is directed almost entirely towards Coleridge the poet, and Coleridge the philosopher is not discussed in BM despite Wilson's own position as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. There are oblique comments, such as a humorous reference to a mental fog in such matters put into the mouth of the

Ettrick Shepherd in a Noctes of April 1824, and a single disagreement with Coleridge on a philosophical point in the same reference, but otherwise a complete silence. While not so distinguished as that of H.N. Coleridge in the Quarterly, the review demonstrated, among considerable praise, a good analysis of the cumulative creation of the character of Geraldine by Coleridge in Christabel, and proved that he was the master of the imagination and the supernatural, except for Shakespeare, whom he equalled. Wilson felt it was difficult to assess Coleridge's total powers; it was a problem of genius and the imagination together. But certainly Coleridge was the most visionary of writers, and Wilson called him a 'remarkable' and a 'wonderful' man. Although he was 'as powerful as Prospero'¹⁰², he had never composed what is called a Great Poem, but he is great in several lines, and the union of these powers is an estimate of his genius. Wilson recognised that Coleridge had introduced a new species of poetry, and the 'dreams' of the Ancient Mariner and Christabel, the passion of the Love Poems, and the attention to blank verse, were all aspects of the power of imagination which ran through them. His review helped to bring Coleridge's poetry to public attention, and led the way for further sympathetic criticism.

CHAPTER SIX

Wilson and Tennyson

Tennyson, in his poem 'To ---', wrote,

-- Beauty, Good, and Knowledge, are three sisters

That doat upon each other, friends to man,¹

This is the poem intended to precede 'The Palace of Art'. The one quality that is eminent in the poetry of Tennyson is beauty. Wilson wrote a review in 1832 of Tennyson's 'pretty verses'² for BM which irritated and upset the poet. As one critic remarked, 'Tennyson was hurt by criticism as a sensitive child might be hurt by the cross look of a passing stranger.'³ But the 'silly squib'⁴ fired in retaliation by Tennyson at 'crusty, rusty, fusty, Christopher'⁵ only succeeded in attracting public attention to his poems, which were eventually to gain him universal recognition by the offer, and his acceptance, of the poet laureateship after Wordsworth, the award of an honorary Oxford degree, and, finally, a peerage for his services to letters.

Tennyson had shown precocious signs of his future development as a poet: as a child of only five he uttered his first poetical phrase, "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind,"⁶ and was soon covering his slate with descriptions in Thomsonian blank verse. He had the advantage of being born into a cultured and literary family, his father the Rev. George Tennyson a clergyman, rector of Somersby and 'a man of various talents - something of a poet, a painter, an architect, and a musician. He was also a considerable linguist and mathematician.'⁷ His mother, a daughter also of a clergyman, was a remarkable and saintly woman, 'One of the most innocent and tender-hearted ladies I ever saw'⁸, wrote Edward Fitzgerald. Hallam Tennyson, in his Memoir, commented that Tennyson was '---notable among his brothers for strength and independence of character,'⁹ and his poetic nature made him frequently solitary despite being a member of a large family. An early poem, occasioned by the death of his grandmother, brought the terse comment from his grandfather, "Here is

half a guinea for you, the first you have ever earned by poetry, and take my word for it, the last."¹⁰ With his brother Charles he published Poems by Two Brothers at the age of eighteen, and at Cambridge, where he entered Trinity College as a scholar, also with his brother Charles, he was awarded the Chancellor's medal for his poem 'Timbuctoo'. His first impression on Thompson, afterwards Master of Trinity, produced the immediate reaction, "That man must be a poet."¹¹ His future as a poet seemed assured with his subsequent publication of Poems Chiefly Lyrical in 1830 when he was still under twenty-one. Contemporary critics admired the volume, and Wordsworth was moved to the opinion that 'he is decidedly the first of our living poets'¹², and further praise was forthcoming in radical reviews. However, the wind of censure was already blowing, heralded by the Tory periodicals of BM and the Quarterly, and Tennyson was subjected to a fierce adverse criticism which ultimately benefited him and enabled him to correct his poems, and helped him become the new literary figure of his age.

On October 4th, 1830, Arthur Hallam wrote to Tennyson, 'I cannot make out that you have been reviewed anywhere, but I have seen no magazines, and a letter from Garden, also of very old date, gives hope of Blackwood.'¹³ Sixteen months later appeared the first reference to Tennyson in BM, in the Noctes of February 1832:

North. All the great schools seem effete --- Scott, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge
 - all the sacred band - have done their best - their all - but on the horizon I
 can see not the far-off coming light of the foreheads of a new generation of
 poets. That dawn will rise over our grave - perhaps not till the forlorn "hic
 jacet" on our tombstones is in green obliteration. The era has been glorious
 - that includes Cowper and Wordsworth, Burns and Byron. From what
 region of man's spirit shall break a new day - spring of song? --- The future
 is all darkness

Tickler.-- ---Are there no youngers?

North. A few - but equivocal. I have good hopes of Alfred Tennyson. But the
 Cockneys are doing what they may to spoil him - an if he suffers them to
 put their birdlime on his feet, he will stick all the days of his life on

hedgerows, or leap fluttering about the bushes. I should be sorry for it - for though his wings are far from being full-fledged, they promise now well in the pinions - and I should not be surprised to see him yet a sky-soarer. -- I admire Alfred - and hope - nay trust - that one day he will prove himself a poet. If he does not - then I am no prophet.¹⁴

Wilson's review of Poems, Chiefly Lyrical in BM of May 1832 led directly from this passage in Noctes. His only other references of importance to Tennyson in BM appeared in February and May 1836, in reviews of Joanna Baillie's Dramas and Alford's School of the Heart. Further brief allusions are in a review of Clare's Rural Muse, August, 1835, where, speaking of the pathetic fallacy, Wilson writes: "The inferior followers of Shelley, Keats, Hunt, and Tennyson, are all addicted to this disgusting practice - and show it chiefly in sonnets. The men we have named are all poets - the creatures we have hinted at are not even poetasters."¹⁵ In a review of Trench's Story of Justin Martyr, September 1835, he praises the sonnets of half a dozen authors, including Tennyson. In Our Two Vases, May, 1838, he merely names the poet in passing. In Christopher in his Alcove, April, 1839, speaking of contemporary young poets, he praises them for avoiding mystifying expressions and gaudy language. "The sumphs," he added, "are all now of the Shelley or of the Tennyson school."¹⁶

Since Lockhart's departure for The Quarterly in 1825, the critical tone of BM had softened and moved away from its early personal attacks towards a more literary and critical image, encouraged by Wilson's early reviews on contemporary poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Tennyson in 1832, when he was at the zenith of his critical faculties. His reviews were always more than just criticisms, they were also literary teachings, and Wilson introduced his reviews of Tennyson's early poems with a definition of poetry and its moral purpose. As a staunch high Tory critic, he was confronted by two opposing forces, the Cockneys, whom he detested, and the contemporary Radical critics who had already lavished their praise on Tennyson. He opens his review with a refusal to define poetry 'because the Cockneys have done so,'¹⁷ and immediately proceeds to define it. 'Everything is poetry

which is not mere sensation. We are poets at all times when our minds are makers.¹⁸ The 'inferior animals'¹⁹, since they 'modify matter much in their imaginations',²⁰ are also poets. He continues:

Thus all men, women, and children, birds, beasts and fishes are poets, except versifiers. Oysters are poets. Nobody will deny that, who ever in the neighbourhood of Prestonpans beheld them passionately gaping, on their native bed, for the flow of tide --- Nor less so are snails --- The beetle, against the traveller borned in heedless hum, if we knew all his feelings in that soliloquy, might safely be pronounced a Wordsworth.²¹

Wilson is drawing a distinction between the true poet who creates poetry from words and ideas, and the versifier who makes poetry as a result of successful verse-construction. He believed that poetry did not have to be understood in order to be appreciated, as it came from the soul and was related to human experience. A critic's function was principally to find and identify the ideas and feelings in the poem, and then show how they evoke the reader's sympathetic response. Following on from this introduction, Wilson introduces Tennyson to the reader and places him as a versifier and a Cockney:

One of the saddest misfortunes that can befall a young poet is to be the Pet of a Coterie; and the very saddest of all, if in Cockneydom. Such has been the unhappy lot of Alfred Tennyson. He has been elevated to the throne of Little Britain.²²

Writing in a patronising spirit, his object was first to attack the critics who had praised Tennyson, and to show how their judgement was mis-guided and mis-placed, then to encourage the young poet, by 'gentle chastisement'²³ and use of the crutch, to develop his obvious talents and to weed out the affectations and present weaknesses which were preventing him becoming a truly great poet.

Wilson considered his prime object was to save Tennyson from his admirers, his friends. The poet had already attracted generous praise, much to Wilson's irritation. The Poems, Chiefly Lyrical were written in Tennyson's twenty-second year, and appeared in 1830, mid-way between his early boyish imitations and his eventual mature poems. They

comprised fifty-six poems on a variety of subjects, and, as the title implied, the language used was essentially musical in effect. In these early poems Tennyson was attempting something new; he was introducing new rhythms and new words and tendencies of thought, which were not always easy to appreciate when critics had formed their tastes on the older poets. Already the poems had been noticed by eight periodicals, including favourable reviews by W.J. Fox in the Westminster Review (January 1831) where he comments that, '---(the Poems) demonstrate the possession of powers. He seems to obtain entrance into a mind as he would make his way into a landscape -- to the great enrichment of our gallery of intellectual scenery.'²⁴ Also, A. Hallam in the Englishman's Magazine (August 1831), in his article "On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson", notes that Tennyson is, '--a poet in the truest and highest sense'²⁵, and he commended the volume to 'feeling hearts and imaginative tempers.'²⁶ Hallam praised Tennyson for following art, noting that he was a poet of 'Sensation' rather than one of 'Reflection', an observation which attracted Wilson's condemnation. Wilson is collectively dismissive of these critics, and he devotes the first part of his review to attacking their 'boundless extravagance of praise'²⁷ before considering the principal excellencies and defects of Tennyson's poems. He comments:

The Englishman's Magazine ought not to have died; for it threatened to be a very pleasant periodical. An Essay "On the Genius of Alfred Tennyson" sent it to the grave. The super-human - nay, supernatural - pomposity of that one paper incapacitated the whole work for living one day longer in this unceremonious world.²⁸

But Wilson concentrates his derision, not on Hallam in the Englishman's Magazine of August 1831, but upon 'the crazy charlatan', 'the quack' writing 'like the Son of a Syringe,' 'the Tailor's Trump,' 'the jewel of a Snip,' 'Parsnip Junior,'²⁹ who has praised the poems in the Westminster Review of January 1831.

In his introductory remarks, he writes that "England ought to be producing some young poets now, that there may be no dull interregnum when the old shall have passed

away."³⁰ The time was ready for the emergence of a new poet, and Wilson had already recognised Tennyson's gifts as a poet in his article in the *Noctes*, where he praised his genius and imagination. He repeats the mental qualities in his review, and notes aspects of Tennyson's genius, namely his rich and vivid imagination, his intuitive sympathy, his ear for melody and harmony, and his studious and instructed eye which could look perceptively at nature and transform the feeling of beauty into poetry. His aesthetic was both subjective, and linked with sympathy, and objective, idealising particular characters or objects. He had the 'vision and faculty divine'³¹, and sense of beauty, which was essential for a true poet. Also, he was learned and had benefitted from a classical education, and assimilated the older poets, especially Shakespeare and Milton.

Using the analogy of a plant to describe the poetic process, Wilson describes Tennyson as 'a promising plant'³², and he continues, "Were we not afraid that our style might be thought to wax too figurative, we should say that Alfred is a promising plant; and that the day may come when, beneath sun and shower, his genius may grow up and expand into a stately tree, embowering a solemn shade within its wide circumference, while the daylight lies gorgeously on its crest, seen from afar in glory - itself a grove."³³ But such a day would never come, Wilson warned him, if he did not listen to the advice of his critic. "We desire to see him prosper, and we predict fame as the fruit of obedience. If he disobey, he assuredly goes to oblivion"³⁴, he remarked. He proceeded to point out the weaknesses of Tennyson's poems, before turning to poems in the volume which struck him as failures. The weaknesses appeared where the poems did not match up to Wilson's particular view of poetry, and he compares him with Wordsworth as a poet. Tennyson did not relate his poems to human experience, and he had no sympathy with 'the common feelings and thoughts of men',³⁵ which were the essence of poetry. He was not a philosophic poet, and his poems were basically personal revelations of his own private thoughts and feelings, which he did not share with the reader. The purpose of poetry was to instruct, and Wordsworth was an example of poets who 'shun not the sights of common earth.'³⁶ Tennyson was not interested in nature or truth, only in attempting to be original, but Wilson felt that the best he could achieve was simply a poor imitation of a model from a former age. He was too anxious to

appear metaphysical, and this was a mistake. Similarly, his attempts to describe the supernatural produced verses of 'distinguished silliness'.³⁷ Other poets, including Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Ettrick Shepherd, and Allan Cunningham, were successful in this genre, but Tennyson could not be ranked with such names. As Wilson remarked, 'But in the preternatural lies not the sphere in which he excels'.³⁸ The failure lay in his literary manner, and his use of "affectations"³⁹ or mannerisms - and his inability to trust his own imagination in preference to following a vague, abstract idea which evaporated into words. He chose words simply for their effect, and use as ornaments, and some of his lines produced 'unmeaningness'⁴⁰, instead of using simple language which appealed to the simplest feeling in the reader. He was guilty of plagiarism, and, finally, he had an 'almost infantile vanity'⁴¹; it was sheer arrogance to assume that every thought and feeling which passed through his mind was automatically worthy of being transformed into a poem.

Wilson links the faults with particular poems, and he proceeded to point out, by quoting extracts, those in the volume which struck him as failures. Seventeen of the poems were regarded as 'miserable' or 'dismal drivel'⁴² and others were ignored by him. Of these seventeen, Tennyson suppressed eight, and he also suppressed fifteen more which had not been noticed and attacked by Wilson and other critics. The 'National Song' and the 'Englishman's War Song' he characterised as 'miserable indeed'⁴³, and a modern critic later commented on their 'jingoism' which he considered 'as astonishing as the triteness of their clichés; hearts of oak, merry England, the only land of the free'.⁴⁴ Similarly, 'We are Free' was 'drivel', 'Lost Hope' more 'dismal drivel', and even more 'dismal drivel' was 'Love, Pride and Forgetfulness'. With reference to the last three of these he accused them of 'a painful and impotent straining after originality - an aversion from the straightforward and strong simplicity of nature and truth'⁴⁵. He had nothing but scorn for the sonnet beginning 'Shall the Hag evil die with child of Good', which gave the impression of being 'idiotic'⁴⁶. The piece entitled 'The Poet's Mind' was 'mostly silly - some of it prettyish - scarcely one line of it all true poetry'.⁴⁷ However, Wilson noted that, 'as it has been admired, we quote it entire,

that, should we be in error, the Poet may triumph over the critic, and Christopher North stand rebuked before the superior genius of Alfred Tennyson⁴⁸. 'The "How" and the "Why" was 'from beginning to end a clumsy and unwieldy failure.'⁴⁹ Similarly, he ridiculed 'The Merman', and regarded its pervading characteristics as 'distinguished silliness',⁵⁰ which applied equally to 'The Mermaid', both Dickens's favourites, and 'The Sea-Fairies'. The last three were particularly selected for censure, not so much to express contempt for them as for their critic. The critic in the Westminster had considered that the poem 'The Merman', was one which proves that "Our author has the secret of the transmigration of the soul."⁵¹ The two pieces, 'Nothing will Die' and 'All Things will Die', so highly praised in the Westminster, were only 'two feeble and fantastic strains.'⁵² The poems of the animal kingdom were further evidence of the philosophy upheld by the Westminster critic, namely, that Tennyson, possessing the secret of the transmigration of the soul, had passed into the bodies of various animals, the Swan, the Grasshopper, and the Owl. The poems provoked Wilson's anger: 'The Dying Swan' he professed himself unable to understand, but as he remembered having heard Hartley Coleridge praise the lines, he accepted that 'they must be fine'.⁵³ As for 'The Grasshopper', Alfred was said to be 'merry as a cricket, and chirps and chirrups, though with less meaning, with more monotony, than that hearth-loving insect.'⁵⁴ The two songs to 'The Owl' were next condemned and ridiculed, and Wilson concluded his attack by assailing 'The Kraken', which he regarded as incomprehensible and 'a great mystery'.⁵⁵ This was a poem later singled out for praise by modern critics; D. Palmer called it 'a strange, powerful, little poem',⁵⁶ and C. Ricks noted its depth of feeling which came from 'pained fascination with the thought of a life which somehow is not life at all'.⁵⁷ Both 'The Kraken' and 'The Dying Swan' were eventually republished in the later 1842 volume, and H. Nicolson notes that in this decision, at least, 'Tennyson was right and Christopher North abundantly wrong'.⁵⁸

Wilson admits he may have unduly exaggerated Tennyson's faults, and the 'rumblings'⁵⁹ which led to the 'gentle chastisement'⁶⁰ of his 'affectations'⁶¹ in the first half of the review are balanced by his enthusiastic praises for Tennyson's 'fine faculties'⁶² in the second half. He now shows 'by judicious eulogy that we admire him,'⁶³ and the 'well-chosen

specimens⁶⁴ of Tennyson's poems reflect Wilson's appreciation and demonstrate how genius and imagination can work together. Tennyson linked his imagination with thought, and his poems show how his imagination was inspired by the classical poets, and the former great poets, and by the beauty of nature. Emotion was blended with his reverence for nature which he used as a support for his creation of a poetry which was both imaginative and decorative. From his emotional sympathy with nature came the words and images which he wove through his poetry to create an expression of delicate beauty and indolent luxury. He successfully preserved the balance between emotion and the will, and he had a firm control over his use of language, experimenting with rhythm and choosing words which appealed for their sound, or musical effect, and for the beauty of the imagery which they brought to eye and ear. He depicted poetry as a source of spiritual beauty, and produced early poems which were 'sweet, still, obscure --⁶⁵, and this romantic idealism was breathed over all his early poems before the realities of life had awakened him and sharpened his focus towards graver issues.

Wilson considered the poems which justified Tennyson being worthy of admiration in ascending order of merit, and many of those he praised were those also selected by modern critics. He could not help admiring the 'Ode to Memory', 'The Deserted House', 'A Dirge', 'Isabel', 'Mariana', 'Adeline', 'The Sleeping Beauty', 'Oriana', and 'Recollections of the Arabian Nights'. The 'Ode to Memory' which Tennyson thought the best of his early nature-poems, is thoughtful and well constructed, 'and all will feel -- the lines are eminently beautiful.⁶⁶ It showed Tennyson's ear for music, and after quoting half of the Ode as illustration, Wilson comments, 'There is fine music there; the versification would be felt delightful to all poetical ears, even if they missed the many meanings of the well-chosen and happily-obedient words; for there is the sound as of a various-voiced river rejoicing in a sudden summer shower, that swells without staining its translucent waters.'⁶⁷ P. Turner noted the 'sharply focused descriptions'⁶⁸ of the surrounding countryside, 'embedded in a framework of rather pompous allegory'.⁶⁹ R. Mayhead also observed the landscape of the

poem as Tennyson's native Lincolnshire, which was presented 'explicitly'.⁷⁰ The appeal of the Ode lay in its pictorial visualization of, for example,

the brook that loves

To purl o'er matted cress and ribbed sand,

Or dimple in the dark of rushy covers,

or:

Stretch'd wide and wild the waste enormous marsh

Where from the frequent bridge,

Like emblems of infinity,

The trenched waters run from sky to sky.

Another critic considered 'Mariana' and the 'Ode to Memory' the two most outstanding poems in the book. 'The Deserted House' was a poem where 'every word tells'⁷¹ and it draws a picture in which the 'short whole is most pathetic in its completeness'.⁷² It was not really noticed by later critics; 'A Dirge' was one of the early 'sweet, still, obscure, poems'⁷³, with a Shakespearean influence: the first line "Now is done thy long day's work" corresponds to "Thou thy wordly task hast done", taken from *Cymbeline*, and the poem itself may have been suggested by a scene from that play. P. Turner notes that the poem points out the advantages of being dead and buried, and C. Ricks that 'it expresses the difficulty in Tennyson of drawing the line between a thin evasiveness and a rewarding indirection'.⁷⁴ Wilson declared himself in love with all the poet's maidens in addition to those already mentioned - with Claribel and Lilian, with Hero and Almeida, and he praised Tennyson's chivalrous and romantic attitude to women: 'He has a delicate perception of the purity of the female character'.⁷⁵ A modern critic, M. Thorn, also commented on the way that 'he could imagine himself so effectively in the female role and in doing so produce poetry which has a universal application'.⁷⁶ Tennyson's note on his poems of this kind was, 'All these ladies were evolved, like the camel, from my own consciousness'.⁷⁷ Ricks described them as 'the early girly poems'⁷⁸ which a contemporary critic, Edward FitzGerald was to deplore - "that stupid Gallery of Beauties".⁷⁹ Lang dismissed them as 'a gallery of airy fairy Lilians, Adelines, Rosalinds, and Eleanores',⁸⁰ but P. Turner felt they were not 'mere pieces of

sentimentality⁸¹ but attempts at psychological descriptions. J. Pettegrew simply wished the ladies had been still-born. 'Isabel' is the 'lily of the garden, of the field, or of the valley.'⁸² It is the best of the portraits of women, and is modelled on the poet's mother. A. Lang noted its 'stately dignity',⁸³ H. Nicolson and P. Turner pointed out the character-traits listed as ones influenced by the stereotype of the perfect wife and mother, pure, kind, intuitive, and obedient. 'Mariana' contained 'profound pathos'⁸⁴ and was a poem which reflected Tennyson's interest in Shakespeare; Wilson comments, 'The young poet had been dreaming of Shakespeare, and of *Measure for Measure*, and of the gentle lady all forlorn, the deserter of the false Angelo---'.⁸⁵ Tennyson described *Measure for Measure* as 'the greatest creation in literature that I know of'⁸⁶ and the poem opens with a quotation from the play, "Mariana in the moated grange". Wilson notes the careful attention to construction: 'Scenery-state-emotion-character-are all in fine keeping.'⁸⁷ Several years later, in 1843, he recorded his impression, '--'Mariana' is admirable description, and yet, on the whole, he wants force in his poetry, which is the fault of his school. There is no manly-vigour-nothing that stirs the blood.'⁸⁸ Modern critics agree that this poem is the best of the volume: J. Pettegrew called it 'the jewel of 1830'⁸⁹, and also noted the link with Shakespeare as had Wilson; C. Ricks rated it 'the finest poem in the 1830 volume'⁹⁰, and drew attention to the lines of Wilson in relation to the unknown ending of the poem: 'Christopher North said of 'Mariana': "long, long, long indeed is the dreary day, but it will end at last,"⁹¹ and to his observation of 'profound pathos'⁹² in the poem. R. Mayhead described it as 'an excellent if slight piece of Romantic Tennyson'⁹³; L. Stevenson felt it 'stood out as the most effective in the volume'⁹⁴, P. Turner called it 'one of the volume's successes'⁹⁵, and Andrew Lang maintained that 'it was in 'Mariana' we first note what may be called his perfection and mature accomplishment.'⁹⁶ Finally, R. Martin considered that of all the poems, 'only 'Mariana' is one of the staples of English poetry.'⁹⁷ 'Claribel' and 'Adeline' are poems which show the skilful blending of thought and feeling, and are concerned with images of life and death. P. Turner described Claribel as 'a type of injured innocence from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*'⁹⁸, but she remained 'too dead to have much individuality'⁹⁹. J. Pettegrew considered that the poem 'rather reeks of the poetical'¹⁰⁰ and its 'lispering line-endings'¹⁰¹ become 'tiresome'¹⁰²

and, together with other archaisms and the Keatsian affectations accentuate a certain effeminacy prominent in 1830. The heroine of 'Adeline' was considered by another modern critic to have greater affinity with the poet; she had qualities like Tennyson, 'shadowy - dreaming, - spiritual',¹⁰³ according to Wilson. 'The Sleeping Beauty' contains 'lovely lines',¹⁰⁴ in Wilson's judgement, and C. Ricks quotes from his criticism, "Life and death," said "Christopher North", meet in the stillness of that sleep - so profound that it is felt as if it were immortal."¹⁰⁵ P. Turner notes the metaphor of sleep as a symbol of the attractions of the inner life, which is an important unifying theme of the early poems. There is admiration for Tennyson's use of some of the old ballads. Wilson suggests that 'Perhaps the most beautiful of all Alfred Tennyson's compositions is the "Ballad of Oriana"'.¹⁰⁶ F. Pinion notes that it echoes 'Fair Helen of Kirkconnell' in Scott's 'Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border' and contained 'balladic virtues which never falter',¹⁰⁷ although the repetitive and cumulative effect of the 'Oriana' refrain brought the poem dangerously near the brink of self-parody. The highest praise is reserved for the 'Recollections of the Arabian Nights', which was Hallam's favourite poem. 'But the highest of all this young poet's achievements, is the visionary and romantic strain, entitled, "Recollections of the Arabian Nights". It is delightful even to us, who read not the Arabian Nights, nor ever heard of them, till late in life - we think we must have been in our tenth year --¹⁰⁸. The poem clearly shows Tennyson's power of imagination, and his ability to describe, by presenting a series of images, scenes of a country he had only read about and seen illustrations of in his early childhood yet, even now, he had 'so passionately and so imaginatively sung their wonders.'¹⁰⁹ R. Mayhead commented on the images and called it 'amiably pleasant'¹¹⁰; C. Ricks noted 'the decorous eroticism-exoticism of "Recollections of the Arabian Nights" - passion and luxury in the best of bad taste'.¹¹¹ J. Pettegrew noted that, 'next to 'Mariana' it is generally the most admired poem of 1830.'¹¹² He added, 'The prime example of the exotic in Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, it is usually seen as opulent tapestry - in Leigh Hunt's phrase as 'mere luxury and exuberance'¹¹³ - but it is also foreshadows themes increasingly dominant in 1832 and 1842; H. Nicolson noted his surprise that the critics had not concentrated more on the stanzas of this poem as showing that 'something new and unmistakably important had occurred'¹¹⁴; it is

'a beautiful poem, with a movement, reminiscent of Keats'¹¹⁵. P. Turner commented that 'the poem has been wrongly regarded, either as a tasteless exhibition of Tennyson's verbal extravagance, or as an elaborate build-up to a symbol of eroticism and injured womanhood.'¹¹⁶ He suggested that the 'technicolour fantasy' merely indicated 'an immature taste in fiction'¹¹⁷.

As his review approached the conclusion, Wilson half apologised for his earlier language of depreciation, and, in correcting it for the press, he realised that its whole merit, which was great, consists in the extracts which are 'beautiful exceedingly'.¹¹⁸ 'Perhaps', he comments, 'in the first part of our article, we may have exaggerated Mr Tennyson's not infrequent silliness, for we are apt to be carried away by the whim of the moment, and in our humorous moods, many things wear a queer look to our aged eyes, which fill young pupils with tears; but we feel assured that in the second part we have not exaggerated his strength - that we have done no more than justice to his fine faculties - and that the millions who delight in *Maga* will, with one voice, confirm our judgement - that Alfred Tennyson is a poet.'¹¹⁹ With further advice regarding the privileges and responsibilities of a poet, and warnings, especially concerning the treatment of nature, Wilson ended an article that was destined to affect Tennyson's literary development during the years immediately following.

Some ten years later, during a conversation with Viscount Cranbrook at Bowness in September 1843, Wilson commented on his motives for writing the review.

I offended Tennyson many years ago by what I thought a very favourable review in *Blackwood*, and I was pleased at the time to receive letters from many persons saying they were glad to find Tennyson so well appreciated in Scotland. However he was displeased at some jocose observations on some of his poems which I thought absurd. He wrote me a short time since saying that I had been right, and he wrong, but still, a man once angry is apt to remain so. I meant well and kindly to him, however, and really thought I behaved so, as I admired much of his poetry.---¹²⁰

At the time of its appearance, the article provoked strong reaction; Hallam, with considerable sense, wrote a letter to Tennyson in which he remarks, 'I suppose one ought to feel very

savage at being attacked, but somehow I feel much more amused.---I think the review will assist than hinder the march of your reputation. They little know the while that you despise the false parts of your volume quite as vehemently as your censors can, and with purer zeal because with better knowledge.¹²¹ But Tennyson was overcome by what Palgrave called his 'surprised sensitiveness'¹²² when he read Wilson's article in October 1832, which he regarded as an attack on his poetry and on Hallam, and he retaliated by publishing the squib against Christopher North in his next volume. Wilson retorted in a review of Motherwell's Poems, April 1833:

We called not long ago on Alfred Tennyson. We singled him out to do him honour. And thousands on thousands delighted in some strains, who might, but for us, never have heard their music. Maga loves to scatter wide over the world the flowers of poetry - the pearls and the diamonds---¹²³

Motherwell, he remarked in the next paragraph, did not belong to a coterie. He criticised Tennyson for the adulation of a 'set', calling him: 'the new star, no less, of Little Britain.'¹²⁴ He scorns the touchiness of Tennyson, and in the fourth number of The Greek Anthology, September 1833, he writes:

George Trevor is not so testy as Alfred Tennyson, and too good a Christian to be incapable, like a cockney, of forgiving an old man's praise,¹²⁵ and in the fifth number of the same series, December 1833, in the course of reviewing another book, he sneers at the poet, commenting that, in order to read it,

We laid ourselves on our sofa (not a little white one like the two dimities that simpleton Alfred Tennyson conquered with in a German Village Inn, but a strapping sofa in buff--)¹²⁶

This is an indirect attack on Tennyson's effeminacy, shown by the contrast between his own buff sofa and the two white dimities that Tennyson used. Meanwhile, in February 1834, appeared a satirical poem by John Lake, and probably some time in that year, Tennyson, apprehensive of further attack, sent what Andrew Lang called "a very manly and generous letter to Christopher North."¹²⁷ In the letter he writes that, 'Tho' I am "the star of Little Britain", I assure you I do not rise or set there very cordially. I prefer vegetating in a very

quiet garden where I neither see nor hear anything of the great world of literature - not lighting upon Maga once a year.'¹²⁸ He admits he may have done, written, and said foolish things, 'not excepting a silly squib to Christopher North.'¹²⁹ but he suggests they now shake hands over the incident. He further condemns his own early poems, and agrees that there is possible grounds for criticism: 'I could wish that some of the poems there broken on your critical wheel were deeper than ever plummet sounded, written as they were before I had attained my nineteenth year they could not but contain as many faults as words. I never wish to see them or hear of them again ---'¹³⁰ Wilson's reply, if he wrote one, has not been preserved, but he appeared ready to make a reconciliation, judging by his only other references of importance to Tennyson in BM which were published in February and May 1836, in reviews of Joanna Baillie's Dramas and Alford's School of the Heart.

The first review begins with a lament for the passing of former great poets, namely Shakespeare, Homer, Milton, and Wordsworth, and a comment on the foolishness of Tennyson's admirers in comparing Tennyson with them. Wilson writes,

'--- Mr Tennyson himself must have wept with vexation at the ineffable folly of his friends who maintained the affirmative. Let him lay to heart the kind counsels of Christopher North, who alone has done justice to his fine faculties, and the laurel crown will ere long be placed on his head. He has yet written but some beautiful verses - a few very charming compositions, that are in truth little poems - not great ones; his feeling is exquisite and so is his fancy - but oh! how feeble too often is his Thought! Feeble because he is a wilful fribble - flattery has made him so - but would he but scorn his sycophants, his strength would be restored, and nature would be glad to see him, what she designed him to be, a true poet.'¹³¹

He refers to the young poets with typical egoism:

Were it not for Us, where would they be? Nowhere Out of Cambridge and Cockneydom, how many scores of Christian creatures have ever seen either of Alfred Tennyson's Volumes? Not fourscore. In Maga many of his best compositions have been perused with delight by tens of thousands - and as sympathy is what every poet fervently desires, how deep ought to be - and how deep must be -

his gratitude to Christopher North! --- Christopher North is the tutor, the guardian, and the patron of the young poets. As they reverence him, they prosper - wanting the light of his countenance, they sicken in the shade, and prematurely die.¹³²

In the second he speaks of the delight he derives from almost every new publication, whether in prose or verse:

We often feel as if we had written what we are reading, and blush to be portrayed into admiration of our own works. ---There have been some exceptions - and among them perhaps the most conspicuous were the Poems, Chiefly Lyrical by Alfred Tennyson. They contained numerous beauties which we feel to be original and out of our sphere and on our expressing our delighted admiration of them, we gave vent to the most unselfish and disinterested feelings that could expand a critic's breast. Their follies were so peculiarly their own that in printing them, almost without comment, we left them to speak for themselves, and they did so to the general scorn. For conduct so judicious and benign, Mr Tennyson commissioned a midge to madden and murder us with its fatal sting.---But one midge, the first and last of his race, could not rationally expect to send Christopher North to Hades. --- We survived the onslaught of the unhappy little insect---¹³³

Wilson admits that Tennyson's genius is 'unquestionable'¹³⁴. Professor Lounsbury, in his book, The Life and Times of Tennyson, gives considerable attention to the importance of the squib to Tennyson, and maintained that Wilson nursed his resentment and launched vindictive attacks on Tennyson at intervals, an opinion questioned by another critic, A.L. Strout. In the review of February 1836, Wilson mentioned Tennyson's two volumes, but he is obviously only dealing with Poems, Chiefly Lyrical according to the passage of May 1832. It is also noteworthy that in the review of Motherwell's poems in April 1833, he shows some irritation at the epigram upon himself, whereas in May 1836 he treats the poet's retort with playful amusement. There is evidence, therefore, that the squib rejoinder possibly affected Wilson more than he admitted.

The criticism of Wilson is both explanatory and appreciative, and can be contrasted in style with the contemptible one written by Lockhart for The Quarterly in 1832. Both critics showed guarded encouragement for Tennyson's poems, but only Lockhart possessed a critical theory, and he provided a clever, politely cruel, and analytic, but just, criticism. Tennyson represented a further development of the school of poetry against which The Quarterly was opposed, and some points of the early criticism were equally offensive to another masculine critic who disliked 'gush'. Wilson demonstrated a wide, sweeping and rhapsodical style, but a generous and digressive criticism which appealed intrinsically to readers' emotions.

The reception of Tennyson's early poems, Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, by hostile reviewers was partly responsible for the 'ten years silence'¹³⁵ until Tennyson's next publication in 1842. The reaction against Tennyson by nineteenth-century critics was largely one of tradition. As a protege of 'the Cockney school', hostility was aroused by his obscurity, silliness, and affectation, but the mauling he received enabled him to correct his early faults and was rather to his advantage, although Tennyson must have resented it. Conservative susceptibilities were offended, and the question of the poet's responsibilities was raised. A poet was a benefactor, and his poetry should enlighten and improve moral and spiritual development. Sensibility was not enough; poets should relate to human experience, as all poets are philosophers.

The BM review is an important landmark in Tennyson criticism, as it first showed the potential of Tennyson as a poet, and placed him on the literary map. The transitional nature of the volume suggested that, although it contained poems which were very bad, there were some that were among the most beautiful he ever wrote. Wilson's review, by a powerful and influential critic, gave the lead and set the tone for contemporary critics to follow, as well as helping to shape the current literary taste. Although one could question the critic who, in 1853, praised Wilson as one 'to whose discriminating criticism Wordsworth owes half his fame, and Tennyson his whole poetic existence'¹³⁶, the fact that Wilson could detect and

perceive a future poet's greatness from a volume of unformed poems, was testament to his own judgement and insight as a critic. His judgements have largely stood the test of time, and many of the poems he praised were also those selected by modern critics. It showed the early revival of descriptive poetry of nature, landscape scenery allied to human feeling like Burns, and brought readers' attention to the poems.

Wilson's review was mixed with praise, but the austerity of his attack was evoked by the moral perspective. What he objected to was Tennyson's lack of humanity, his affectations, and lavish ornaments, the fact that he was too aloof as a poet, and his poetry did not instruct. He complained of Tennyson's early poems that, 'What all the human race see and feel, he seems to think cannot be poetical; he is not aware of the transcendent and eternal grandeur of common-place and all-time truths, which are the staple of all poetry.'¹³⁷ His objections lay in the idea of poetry, and the view of the poet as a seer and a prophet.

All human beings see the same light in heaven and in woman's eyes; and the great poets put it into language which rather records than reveals, spiritualizing while it embodies.--- Scott, when eulogizing our love of our native land, uses the simplest language, and gives vent to the simplest feelings -

Lives there the man with soul so dead,

Who never to himself hath said,

This is my own, my native land?

What less - what more, could any man say? Yet translate these three lines - not omitting others that accompany them, equally touching - into any language, living or dead - and they will instant be felt by all hearts, savage or civilized, to be the most exquisite poetry.¹³⁸

Tennyson showed both sides in his poetry; he was intellectual and reflective, but he did not 'think' a feeling, although he tried to be philosophical, and Wilson regretted that he belongs to the school of feeling and not to the one of thought, and that he was a poet of sensation rather than one of reflection.

Most of the pieces which BM condemned were omitted in subsequent editions, and in regard to those which he praised, his judgement has generally been upheld by later

opinion. Modern critics agree that the early volume was uneven; the early period contains some of his 'very worst utterances' according to R. Mayhead, who added, 'the early Romantic poems are attractive but it would be out of the question to call any one of them great'¹³⁹; another critic, R. Martin, commented, 'the contents are uneven in quality, and some of the poems are bad by any standard, but there are none the less a handful of poems that show for the first time that Tennyson was a great poet in the bud.'¹⁴⁰ The manner of the way the early faults were illustrated and deplored was regarded as savage by modern critics; Thorn described it as 'a cutting attack'¹⁴¹; Ricks mentioned the 'witty savagery by a powerful reviewer'¹⁴², calling it 'witheringly acerb'¹⁴³, and Turner that it was 'patronizing'¹⁴⁴ and 'discouraging'¹⁴⁵. The merit of the review, according to critics, lay in two extremes; H. Nicolson felt that the review had no effect on public opinion, while, on the other hand, others considered the review was 'salutary'. M. Thorn noted that, 'If it is true that no writer becomes properly professional until they have had their work abused, then Tennyson's mauling by John Wilson did set in motion his public reputation.'¹⁴⁶ Similarly, J. Jump shared Hallam's observation that it was beneficial to Tennyson's reputation, and also showed the closeness of Wilson's judgement with that of Hallam. E. Shannon in Tennyson and the Reviewers suggested that Tennyson did not suffer so much hostility and abuse from contemporary reviewers as has often been supposed, and his findings reveal that the reviewers 'exerted a continuous pressure upon him to teach more than to delight, to be speculative and analytical rather than poetical.'¹⁴⁷ There was general agreement that the contemporary reviews had forced him into a new self-appraisal that was responsible for superior poetry in the 1842 volume. However, Tennyson will be appreciated, irrespective of criticism, because of the poems he wrote.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wilson and Thomson

Wilson's criticism of Thomson shows his involvement with Scottish nationalism, and his wish to draw attention to a characteristically Scottish culture. In his essay, 'A Few words on Thomson', which the Edinburgh Review called 'a very beautiful paper',¹ Wilson described Thomson as 'an inspired bard - only a little lower than the Prophets'.² Thomson had published The Seasons in 1730, which was a new genre of descriptive poetry having nature as its subject, where every image has its emotion and we reap

The harvest of a quiet eye

That broods and sleeps on its own heart

In Wilson's judgement, Thomson, as a Scotsman, had awakened Scotland to poetry, and his name would deservedly stand at the place assigned it by Nature on the roll call of the poets of Scotland.

Thomson's poetry divides mainly into the following kinds: the early short poems; the descriptive philosophical poem The Seasons; the reflective historical poem Liberty; memorial verses; the Spenserian allegory: The Castle of Indolence; and the verse dramas.

An early juvenile poem showed the theme Thomson was to develop in The Seasons. As Johnson wrote, 'He thinks in a peculiar train, and he thinks always as a man of genius; he looks around on nature and on life with the eye which Nature bestows only on a poet...'³ His interests were partly intellectual and partly moral, and he showed a romantic feeling in his love of nature and the religious and philosophical implications involved. His sense of wonder, and mystery of God, revealed in the works of nature a quality of sublimity and grandeur that had an unquestioned affinity with poetry. To write about Nature was to be involved with many things: the scientific, pictorial, and the religious. In 1725 he wrote the

Hymn on Solitude, in which he demonstrated the Deistic belief in the existence of God in all nature. The religious feeling is related to every season,

These, as they change, Almighty Father! these
Are but the varied God. The rolling year
Is full of Thee.

Hymn (1-3)

The Seasons is noted for its description of general and specific aspects of nature, the scientific interest inspired by Newton, and Locke, and the enlightenment, and a religious mood of awe, and was popular well through the nineteenth century. It was a descriptive and meditative poem which acknowledged its debt to the Georgics and to 'Pomana's Bard'. As Thomson wrote in the Preface to the second edition of Winter, 'I know no subject more elevating, more amusing, more ready to awaken the poetical enthusiasm, the philosophical effects and the moral sentiment than the works of Nature. Where can we meet with such variety, such beauty, such magnificence? All that enlarges and transports the soul'⁴ It was similar to the descriptive poems of Denham's Cooper's Hill and Pope's Windsor Forest, which were defined by Johnson as, 'local poetry, of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape, to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospection, or incidental meditation.'⁵ Thomson's 'particular' landscapes are many and his survey is global rather than local, but the rest of the definition fits The Seasons. The 'embellishments' are added to make the poem a mixture of philosophy and description.

The framework is natural description, and as Wilson noted, 'Descriptive poetry is the most dull or the most delightful thing in the united kingdoms of Art and Nature'.⁶ In the context of his remark, that the descriptive poets during the period between Milton and Thomson were 'few and indifferent'⁷, and Wordsworth's dictum that 'excepting the "Nocturnal Reverie of Lady Winchelsea, and a passage or two in the "Windsor Forest" of Pope, the poetry of the period intervening between the publication of the "Paradise Lost" and "The Seasons" does not contain a single new image of external nature'⁸, one can understand

the novelty and attraction of the poem at that time. As Wilson observed, 'causes there were why poetry flowed during that era in another channel than that of the description of natural scenery; no reason is there in this world for imagining, with Mr. Wordsworth, that men had forgotten both the heavens and the earth. They had not - nor was the wonder with which they must have regarded the great shows of nature, the "natural product of ignorance," then, any more than it is now, or ever was during a civilised age.'⁹ Also, as Wilson pointed out,

"The art of seeing" has flourished for many centuries in Scotland. Men, women, and children all look up to her loveful blue or wrathful black skies, with a weather-wisdom that keeps growing from the cradle to the grave.
Say not that 'tis alone

The poor Indian, whose untutor'd mind

Sees God in clouds, and hears Him in the wind

In Scriptural language, loftier even than that, the same imagery is applied to the sights seen by the true believer. Who is it "that maketh the clouds His chariot?" The Scottish peasantry - Highland and Lowland - look much and often on nature thus: and they live in the heart of the knowledge and of the religion of nature.'¹⁰

Thomson belonged to no era; he 'effulged all at once sunlike-like Scotland's storm-loving, mist-enamoured sun'¹¹, but his follower was Cowper, and they were both "heralds of a mighty train ensuing"¹². In The Seasons, Thomson had written an 'original and sublime'¹³ poem which was universally popular and had become a 'household book'¹⁴ in Scotland. Coleridge noted it was comparable with the Bible. The 'Castle of Indolence' was imaginative, but The Seasons dealt with 'glorious realities'¹⁵, and showed Nature in all her moods and aspects, that is, the complete season culminating in the final Hymn.

Wilson's criticism of The Seasons cannot be fully appreciated or understood unless one is aware of his invocation of the great landscape painters and their power. He had early aspirations to be a painter, but remained content to write prose and show instead such scenes

"As savage Rosa dash'd, or learned Poussin drew"

Here an English Lake - there a Scottish loch - till Turner grew jealous,
 and Thomson flung his brush at one of his own unfinished mountains -
 when lo! a miracle! Creative of grandeur in his very despair, he stood
 astonished at the cliff that came prerupt from his canvas, and christened
 itself "the Eagle's Eyrie," as it *frowned serenely* upon the sea, maddening in
 a foamy circle at its inaccessible feet.¹⁶

In the BM November 1827, he observed that 'all the different kinds of composition depend, for their excellence, on different principles of the same one great various art - the Art of Imaging'¹⁷. The Painter had to work in a spirit of simplicity, but 'he who images in Poetry has an ampler sphere; and simplicity, though she accompanies the poet still, is no longer a dominant, but a subordinate spirit'¹⁸. Wilson noted that, 'Imagination who limns in air, has none of those difficulties to contend with that always beset, and often baffle, artists in oils or waters'.¹⁹ As Wilson observed, 'every true and accepted lover of nature regards her with a painter's as well as a poet's eye'.²⁰ They break down parts and particularize to make wholes. Dugald Stewart remarked in 1798 that there were no details which could not be joined together in the imagination to form a whole, and Disraeli declared, 'There is no subject in nature and in the history of men, which will not associate our feelings and our curiosity, whenever genius extends its awakening hand.'²¹ In 1831, Wilson explained

---There are a thousand ways of dealing in description with Nature, so as to make her poetical; but sentiment there must always be, else it is stark nought.---Then some poets there are, who show you a scene all of a sudden, by means of a few magical words - just as if you opened your eyes at their bidding - and in place of a blank, a world. Others, again, as good and as great, create their world gradually before your eyes, for the delight of your soul --Some heap image upon image, piles of imagery on piles of imagery,---yet all things there are consentaneous with one grand design, which, when consummated, is a Whole that seems to typify the universe. Others give you but fragments - but such as awaken imaginations of beauty and of power transcendent -- And some show you Nature glimmering

beneath a veil which, nunlike, she has religiously taken; and then call not Nature ideal only in that holy twilight, for then it is that she is spiritual, and we who belong to her feel that we shall live for ever. Thus - and in other wondrous ways - the great poets are the great painters, and so are they the great musicians.²²

Wilson adds, 'We sometimes think that the power of painting Nature to the life, whether in her real or ideal beauty (both belong to *life*), is seldom evolved to its utmost, until the mind possessing it is withdrawn in the body from all rural *environment*. It has not been so with Wordsworth, but it was so with Milton. The descriptive poetry in "Comus" is indeed rich as rich may be, but certainly not so great, perhaps not so beautiful, as that in "Paradise Lost".²³ Consistent with his theory, Wilson appealed to the 'idea' in the minds as an ideal, rather than a separate element. A word is an image which appealed to the conceptive faculty, seen in the mind's eye. Description for Wilson was the effect of pictures to the mind, rather than the communication of feeling about pictures, and it pleases because of its accuracy and its truthfulness: As Wilson notes, 'The truth is - and it will out - that the poet alone sees his world nor does it make the slightest difference to him whether his eyes are open or shut ... all the imagery it ever knows has been gathered up by the perceiving soul during that period of time - afterwards 'tis the divining soul that works -'.²⁴ Thomson was an 'inspired' bard because he directs people's eyes to what inspires them, and he paints rather than describes, as the scenery evolves before a mind poetically susceptible. Feeling is related to the human factor in the poem, not just to the eye, as it is seen and as it is felt, but to the whole man. Wilson shows that although Thomson had the spirit of a poet, he had the mind and art of a painter.

Thomson had learnt early in life

'to Muse on Nature with a Poet's eye'.

He stores up images when young, as 'Imagination's treasury'²⁵, and revived them from memory. He had been led by the natural bent of his genius to old haunts of inspiration, the sounds and sights of his native country, and a romantic view of Scotland which Wilson

described as a feeling, 'The lovely Lowlands undulating away into the glorious Highlands - the spirit of sublimity and the spirit of beauty one and the same, as it blends them in indissoluble union.'²⁶ But he was also the poet of Britain, and, as Wilson noted, 'bounds not the heart of every Briton to the music of his national anthem,'²⁷

Rule, Britannia,

Britannia rules the waves!

His was a national genius, that is, the power came from the heart, and was interrelated with man and nature in harmony. He knew the

sensations sweet -

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,

Tintern Abbey [27-28]

that are the response to the beauty of nature. Early poems were too descriptive, and were written 'while pure description held the place of sense'²⁸. Thomson showed a mood and a way of thinking which was new and different in poetry. As Johnson noted, 'The reader of *The Seasons* wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shows him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses.'²⁹ Wilson added, 'Almost all human nature can, in some measure, understand and feel the most exquisite and recondite image which only the rarest genius could produce'.³⁰ There was 'a phenomenon that only the eye of genius sees, because only the soul of genius can give it a presence-though afterwards all eyes dimly recognise it, on its being shown to them, as something more vivid than their own faint experience, yet either kindred to it, or virtually one and the same.'³¹ This is what Wilson meant by genius.

The excellence of a poet or a painter is determined by his genius, and Thomson's sweeping style characterised his genius. Wilson's contribution to describing Thomson's diction lay in his view on poetry, and his sensitivity to language, and a comparison of Thomson and Cowper. Wilson regards comparisons as 'odoriferous'³² unless performed in love, and he shows the essential difference between the two poets and the two poems. As he observed,

Thomson's genius does not so often delight us by exquisite minute touches in the description of nature as that of Cowper. It loves to paint on a great scale, and to dash objects off sweepingly by bold strokes - such, indeed, as have almost always distinguished the mighty masters of the lyre and the rainbow. Cowper sets nature before your eyes - Thomson before your imagination. Which do you prefer? Both. Be assured that both poets had pored night and day upon her - in all her aspects - and that she had revealed herself fully to both. But they, in their religion, elected different modes of worship - and both were worthy of the mighty mother. In one mood of mind we love Cowper best, in another Thomson. Sometimes the Seasons are almost a Task - and sometimes the Task is out of Season.-----Cowper paints trees - Thomson woods. Thomson paints, in a few wondrous lines, rivers from source to sea, like the mighty Burrampooter - Cowper, in many no very wondrous lines, brightens up one bend of a stream, or awakens our fancy to the murmur of some single waterfall. But a truce to antithesis - a deceptive style of criticism-----³³

The scenery of The Task is as English as The Seasons is Scottish. He liked both poems, and both appealed in different moods, one to the heart and one to the mind. He agreed that Thomson had sometimes written a 'vicious' style as Wordsworth considered, but he defended it on the grounds of youthful enthusiasm. His defects were 'all committed in the flow of that fine and bold enthusiasm, which to his imagination arrayed all things, and all words in a light that seemed to him at the time to be poetry - though sometimes it was but "false glitter"'.³⁴ The unevenness of his style was explained by Wilson, 'He luxuriates - he revels - he wantons - at once with an imaginative and a sensuous delight in nature.'³⁵ He had not philosophised his poetical language, as Wordsworth himself has done, and Wilson considered that there was a charm in the free, flowing, chartered libertinism of the diction and versification of The Seasons, especially in the closing strains of the Winter, and in the whole of the Hymn, which inspires a delight and a wonder which is seldom felt in the 'more measured'³⁶ march of The Excursion. Joseph Warton called him 'a favourite author, and

who would have been a first-rate poet, if his style had been equal to his conceptions'.³⁷

Coleridge judged that 'Thomson was a great poet, rather than a good one; his style was as meretricious as his thoughts were natural',³⁸ and Wordsworth that 'notwithstanding his high powers, he writes a vicious style'.³⁹

In 1843 the Edinburgh Review described the development of the critical method of generalisation at the beginning of the nineteenth century as 'the natural reaction which followed against an effete and worn-out system'.⁴⁰

By degrees it was found to be much easier to deal with these generalities and abstractions than to descend to particulars; - to frame a theory, or write a philosophical essay having the slenderest application to the case in hand, than to direct the criticism to the real appreciation of the work to be reviewed. At best our criticism became in great measure limited to some sketch of the general design of the work, and its relation to the particular theory patronised for the time by the critic.⁴¹

But Wilson was opposed to this: 'To this system of praise and blame, unaccompanied by a due application of critical particulars, the practice of the writer of these *Recreations* stands opposed'.⁴² His particular criticism, 'its minute dissection of particular passages, both as to thought and diction, carries us back to the thought and diction of Addison and Johnson, rather than to our own time',⁴³ as the reviewer of Wilson's Recreations of Christopher North pointed out. The principle of generalization distinguishes between the historical and poetical approach; the poet will reject the individual and particular aspects of his subject. '--- True genius - burning within the bosoms of a few favourite sons of nature --- reveals to them all that is fair and bright and beautiful in feeling and imagination, makes them very poets indeed---'.⁴⁴ There is possibly an echo of Wordsworth, the poet, '--- considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature.'⁴⁵ Wilson's method was to heighten the characteristics of a passage by his theory of word painting as it related to Thomson's poetry. This approach was reflected in his pictorial manner, which was impressionistic rather than

analytical. The important points are the examples he gives, rather than the reflection of critical values and ideals. His theory of imagination was different from that of Wordsworth, as it was not exclusive and confined to a specific section or area or poet, but was based on enthusiasm and universality, but inherent in the criticism are the knowledge of human experience and the scientific, religious and philosophical ideas appropriate to the early nineteenth century. His interpretation was one of tenderness, that appealed to the heart and struck a chord of goodness and innocence, and suggested internal feelings and the oneness of nature and of man.

Wilson's reviews for the BM were contained in articles entitled Winter Rhapsody, 1830, and A Few Words on Thomson, 1831, later reprinted in The Recreations. He asks why The Seasons was a great Poem, and says it was a 'sublime idea'⁴⁶ to show the different seasons. Thomson wrote the poem in separate parts and separate editions; Winter was published in 1726, and out of this grew successively Summer (1727), Spring (1728), and ultimately in 1730 The Seasons, including Autumn, and the closing Hymn:

These as they change, Almighty Father! these
Are but the varied God. The rolling year
Is full of thee.

[Hymn. 1-3]

The final revised edition, from which Wilson quotes, appeared in 1746. Johnson said there was no method, but actually there was an individual theme for each poem, and each shaded into the other, and showed the dependence of man and nature, man to nature, not nature to man.

The principal attitudes underlying the poetry of Thomson are his patriotism and his religious ardour. As a romantic critic, Wilson is concerned with the imaginative quality of nature, and he confines Thomson's patriotism mainly to his own country, pointing out that, as far as possible, and 'without insult, injury, or injustice',⁴⁷ Thomson has made The Seasons 'solely Scottish'.⁴⁸

His suns rise and set in Scottish heavens; his "deep-fermenting tempests are brewed in grim evening" Scottish skies; Scottish is his thunder of cloud and cataract; his

"vapours, and snows, and storms" are Scottish; and, strange as the assertion would have sounded in the ears of Samuel Johnson, Scottish are his woods, their sigh, and their roar; nor less their stillness, more awful amidst the vast multitude of steady stems, than when all the sullen pine-tops are swinging to the hurricane. A dread love of his native land was in his heart when he cried in the solitude -

"Hail, kindred glooms! congenial horrors, hail!"⁴⁹

It is not the historical as the geographical or scenic association of his country that inspired him. He had belonged to the people of Scotland who loved the old ballads, the select brotherhood of his native land who love 'the land of brown heath---'⁵⁰ seen in the poetry of Burns and Scott, and in the lovely expression in the verse of Thomson. The way his natural description is achieved in poetic language Wilson shows by his examples of, first, broad wide panoramas; second, terrifying and sublime scenes; third, precision of close, observed detail; fourth, use of personification.

As Wilson pointed out in his earlier essay, Soliloquies on The Seasons, many analogies between the seasons of the year and the seasons of life, have been a frequent theme of poetry in all countries. It is possible that Thomson regarded the subject of the progress of man's life in this light when, at the suggestion of his friend Mallet, he chose to write the four Seasons into one continuous poem, making 'hoary Winter' the end and the infant Spring the commencement. Wilson illustrates Thomson's preference for personification as poetic imagery when he considers the genders of Thomson's Seasons. On Spring therefore he calls,

Come, gentle Spring, ethereal mildness, come,
And from the bosom of yon dropping cloud,
While music wakes around, veil'd in a shower
Of shadowing roses, on our plains descend! [Spring. 1-4]

Various critics disputed the opening of the poem, but Wilson declared that 'never had a poem a more beautiful beginning'.⁵¹ He admitted that it was never to his taste, but the picture is 'indistinctly and obscurely beautiful to the imagination, and there is not a syllable about sex - though "ethereal mildness", which is an Impersonation, and hardly an Impersonation, must be, it is felt, a Virgin Goddess ---'.⁵² Wilson pointed out that "ethereal mildness"⁵³ was an indistinct image, which other critics had also recognised. It showed that Thomson was an inspired Bard, inspired by passionate emotion, not thought, and was an opposite view to Hazlitt's which denied that Thomson was inspired in these lines. The reference to roses, although vague, was appropriate with the poet's 'passionate emotion'⁵⁴, and an 'imperfect Impersonation is often proof positive of the highest state of poetical enthusiasm'.⁵⁵ But Hazlitt was among many critics who disagreed on the personification. Writing in 1818, he attacked the passage:

(Thomson) overloads an exquisitely natural sentiment or image with a cloud of painted, pompous, cumbrous phrases, like the shower of roses, in which he represents the Spring, his own lovely, fresh, and innocent Spring, as descending to the earth - a flimsy, round-about unmeaning commencement.⁵⁶

The rain is welcomed by the thirsty animals, and Wilson notes the grandeur of the words -

'Equally great are the words -

Herds and flocks

Drop the dry sprig , and, mute-imploring, eye
the falling verdure.

[Spring, 11. 162-4]

He comments,

'The verdure is seen in the shower-to be the very shower-by the poet at least-perhaps by the cattle, in their thirsty hunger forgetful of the brown ground, and swallowing the dropping herbage.'⁵⁷

Wilson uses language associatively, to transform nature, and, by his sympathy, Thomson was established in the role of a humane and a religious poet. His images show the beauty and

bounty of nature as Wilson pointed out, and he denies that Thomson was 'too fond of epithets',⁵⁸ noting that 'genius in one line has concentrated them all -'⁵⁹

"Beholds the kindling country round"

After the description of the Rain Shower, which dealt with its communal relation to nature and man, rather than a destructive element, the poem opens out into a passage of awakening music, shown in the imagery of colour and sound. For Wilson, every evening appeared more beautiful than the previous one because of the words in which 'the beauty and the glory of one and all are enshrined'⁶⁰ -

Till, in the western sky, the downward sun
Looks out, effulgent, from amid the flush
Of broken clouds, gay-shifting to his beam.
The rapid radiance, instantaneous, strikes
Th' illumined mountain, through the forest streams
Shakes on the floods, and in a yellow mist,
Far smoking o'er th' interminable plain,
In twinkling myriads lights the dewy gems.
Moist, bright, and green, the landscape laughs around.
Full swell the woods; their every music wakes,
Mix'd in wild concert with the warbling brooks
Increased, the distant bleatings of the hills,
And hollow lows responsive from the vales,
Whence, blending all, the sweeten'd zephyr springs

(189-202)

Wilson explains the effect by association;

Every shade of feeling should have its shade of
sound - every pause its silence. But these must all
come and go, untaught, unbidden, from the fulness
of the heart. Then indeed, and not till then, can
words be said to be set to music - to a *celestial sing-song*.⁶¹

There were 'a thousand other sounds sublime or touching, which are heard in the heart of nature'⁶², and these must be present in our thoughts when speaking of the access of emotion to the human mind through the sense of the ear. These influences affect the mind through the imagination, but there were still influences from the voice of nature which take a stronger possession of the spirit, and speak to it with a deeper power, as expressed in the well-known lines, describing

The poor Indian, whose untutor'd mind
Sees God in clouds, and hears him in the wind.

Spring gives way to Summer, where the Impersonation is stronger.

From brightening fields of ether fair disclosed,
Child of the Sun, refulgent Summer comes, ----
While, from his ardent look, the turning Spring
Averts her blushful face, and earth, and skies,

All smiling, to his hot dominian leaves. [Summer. 108]

Wilson describes it as 'a jewel of a picture'.⁶³ and Thomson having made spring feminine, very properly makes summer masculine. He felt that the description of Spring, averting her blushful face from the Summer's ardent look, was more of an Impersonation than in the earlier passage. It is a devotional poem, praising Nature, the Almighty Power.

Wilson felt that the Impersonation is complete in Autumn.

Crown'd with the sickle and the wheaten sheaf
While Autumn, nodding o'er the yellow plain,
Comes jovial on

[Autumn. 103]

Wilson judged these lines to be bad noting that "nodding o'er the yellow plain" was a mere statement of a fact in nature, and descriptive of the growing and ripening harvest, but is applied here to Autumn, as an allegorical figure who "comes jovial on". This was not an obscurity or indistinctness, which was often a great beauty in Impersonation, but it was an inconsistency, and a contradiction, and therefore indefensible on any grounds either of

conception or expression. The allegorical personification is concentrated, therefore it is 'complete', and although the sex of Autumn is not mentioned, it is manifestly meant to be male.

Thomson begins his Winter by describing the delight he took in his boyish days of wandering over the hills near his home in frost and snow. It was a 'sublime evocation'⁶⁴ and eulogises the poet's love for Scotland,

See, Winter comes, to rule the varied year,
Sullen and sad, with all his rising train,
Vapours, and clouds, and storms. Be these my theme,
These! that exalt the soul to solemn thought,
And heavenly musing. Welcome, kindred glooms!

[Winter 1-5]

Thomson was drawing associations from his memory-which was 'a critic you may always trust to'⁶⁵ - and from his early reading of travel books, and reviving them in images. The 1746 edition that Wilson used begins with the description Thomson recalls as boy. The season has its associations with storms, rain and snow, all with increasing severity; the last is a snow shower. The descriptive passages show Thomson was a close and accurate observer:

The cherish'd fields
Put on their winter-robe of purest white.
'Tis brightness all; save where the new snow melts
Along the mazy current.

[232-235]

It described the function of snow, and 'Nothing can be more vivid. 'tis of the nature of an oracular spectrum.'⁶⁶ Wilson points out Thomson's use of poetic diction, with his choice of the epithet, 'brown' in the lines -

The foodless wilds
Pour forth their brown inhabitants.

[256-256]

This one word proves the poet, and the working of the poetic imagination, and it is admirable as a contrast to the stillness of the surrounding white landscape. The 'brownness' stands out as the most glorious thing about them, and it is vivid because it is truthful and effective.

Drooping, the ox
Stands cover'd o'er with snow, and then demands
The fruit of all his toil

[240-242]

The image of the ox was good, and could be seen in the mind's eye, but it was 'rather fantastical'⁶⁷ of Thomson expecting him "demanding the fruit of all his toils". Wilson felt that Thomson had transferred his own feeling to convert a condition, 'With looks of dumb despair', but had they been in despair they would not have been digging. He had redeemed himself in the following lines,

Then, sad dispersed,
Dig for the wither'd herb through heaps of snow
As they disperse, they do indeed look very sad.

The description of the whirlwind Wilson quoted as an example of the 'sweeping style'⁶⁸ of description which characterised Thomson's genius:

From the bellowing east,
In this dire season, oft the whirlwind's wing
Sweeps up the burden of whole wintry plains
At one wide waft, and o'er the hapless flocks,
Hid in the hollow of two neighbouring hills,
The billowy tempest whelms; till, upward urged,
The valley to a shining mountain swells,
Tipp'd with a wreath high-curling in the sky.

[168-175]

The shepherds defy the fierceness of winter by filling up the sheep pens with food; they 'baffle the raging year', and this was not an absurd expression as Thomson was inspired by

the storm. He had drawn a scene which was so natural that our perception of it is no less real than if it had existed.

Wilson considers the phenomenon of frost, comparing its description by Burns, which was 'exquisitely'⁶⁹ pictured

The chilly frost beneath the silver beam,
Crept, gently crusting o'er the glittering stream!

but Thomson possessed 'an almost finer spirit of perception - or conception - or memory - or whatever else you choose to call it; for our part, we call it genius-'⁷⁰

An icy gale, oft shifting, o'er the pool
Breathes a blue film, and in its mid career
Arrests the bickering stream.

[723-25]

The whole scene concludes strongly with the line -

The whole imprison'd river growls below.

Again, Wilson notes the 'peculiar genius'⁷¹ of Cowper contrasted with that of Thomson, the gentle Cowper delighting, for the most part, in tranquil images, the enthusiastic Thomson, more pleased with images of power. Cowper remarked -

On the flood,
Indurated and fixed, the snowy weight
Lies undissolved, while silently beneath,
And unperceived, the current steals away.

Wilson is aware of the many readers who feel, rather than those who reason, and, as he points out, it is the feeling of cold, not as it is seen, but as it is experienced that is conveyed. The following lines could not have been written by any other poet at this time

In these fell regions, in Arzina caught,
And to the stony deep his idle ship
Immediate seal'd, he with his hapless crew,
Each full exerted at his several task,

Froze into statues; to the cordage glued

The sailor, and the pilot to the helm!

[930-935]

The effect was powerfully rendered, and chilled one's very blood with the intensity of the cold.

Wilson recognised that Thomson sometimes wrote with inaccurate knowledge, and the control over his material was sometimes ambiguous, and this had to be considered in looking at Thomson as a 'whole'. The description of the wolves among the Alps, Apennines, and Pyrenees contained ten lines that are 'positively bad'.⁷²

The godlike face of man avails him nought!

Even beauty, force divine! at whose bright glance

The generous lion stands in soften'd gaze,

Now bleeds, a hapless undistinguish'd prey.

But if, apprised of the severe attack,

The country be shut up, lured by the scent,

On churchyard drear (inhuman to relate!)

The disappointed prowlers fall, and dig

The shrouded body from the grave; o'er which,

Mix'd with foul shades and frighted ghosts, they howl.

[404-414]

Wilson ridiculed the softened gaze of the lion and declared that Thomson 'so far from making poetry of it in this passage has vulgarized and blurred by it the natural and inevitable emotion of terror and pity. Famished wolves *howking* up the dead is a dreadful image - but '*inhuman to relate*' is not an expression heavily laden with meaning'.⁷³ There was a similarity of style, as Wilson observed, between Thomson and Homer, and he questions which poet was 'wildest on wolves'.⁷⁴ He concluded that both bards are great, but Thomson expatiates more in his description, indicating more liberty in his expression, whereas Homer seized on them as a simile and an exercise of imagination.

Readers were urged to read the opening of Winter and to note its Scottish character, and depiction of Scottish scenes, which take up two thirds of the poem. They were to acknowledge that, '...of all climates and all countries, there are none within any of the zones of the earth that will bear a moment's comparison with those of Scotland.'⁷⁵ Thomson had experienced the mists and snows he created, and his description came from 'a warm human heart',⁷⁶ Wilson was particularly angry with Wordsworth's judgement that the popularity of Winter was attributable to his 'commonplace sentimentalities, and his vicious style!'⁷⁷ Thomson was always the poet of The Seasons, and he combined a rich sensuous description with tenderness and feeling in a manner that was highly individual.

The Castle of Indolence was an allegory, written in two cantos. There were no such essential vices as impersonation here, as by then Thomson had subjected his inspiration to thought, and his poetry, guarded and guided by philosophy, became 'as celestial as an angel's song'.⁷⁸ As Wilson observed, The Castle of Indolence, is distinguished by purer taste and finer fancy, but with all its 'exquisite beauties'⁷⁹ the poem is 'only the vision of a dream'⁸⁰. It is the shepherd who has a dream, showing Thomson's association of superstition with the low-class peasants, and he is from the Hebrides,

As when a Shepherd of the Hebrid-Isles

Plac'd far amid the melancholy Main.

Thomson had seen no more of the Hebrides than of the Sahara or Lapland, but the Hebrides are in Scotland. He uses his imagination to suggest a patriotic link, and it is the emotional element in all his pictures that is their most characteristic quality.

The inserted tales are examples of Thomson's mixture of description and narrative. Some give mild and widespread pleasure, and offset the basic natural descriptions, for example, the story of Palemona and Lavinia, and the Rhapsody on Love; Wordsworth attributed much of the popularity to these. Wilson agrees that there is something not very credible in the action of the parties, and much of the sentiment is common place. He

considers that the Lavinia story is 'a very beautiful one'⁸¹, and is facetious about Damon and Musidora. He denies that there ever was a time when such passages were 'generally esteemed the glory of the poem.'⁸²

Wilson regarded Thomson as a great poet, rather than a good one. He appealed because he was another worshipper of nature, whose 'transcendent genius'⁸³ used the value of description in a particular way to depict Scottish scenery, and to evoke Scottish sentiment. If he was not the greatest of descriptive poets, he was surely the most delightful, and as Wilson comments, 'Thomson had not the philosophical genius of Wordsworth, but he had a warm human heart...'⁸⁴ What he achieved, Wilson summarised in his statement that, 'Poetry, which, though not dead, had long been sleeping in Scotland, was restored to waking life by Thomson'⁸⁵. True poetry 'burst in beauty'⁸⁶ over the land, and people became intolerant of "false glitter"⁸⁷. It seemed as if spring had indeed descended from heaven, "veiled in a shower of shadowing roses",⁸⁸ and there is a new scene after every shower as all poets, to become famous, celebrate the worship of nature. It is in the mountains of the Highlands that we can best see and hear the sights and sounds of nature, and the peasants had always been accustomed to these. As a sublime poet, he ranged wide and high, and in his lofty mood he had gloriously sung in his "Hymn to the Seasons", seeing in all the changes of the rolling year "but the varied god".⁸⁹ Similarly, Wordsworth, in his Excursion, communed, too, with the spirit "but the land of truth is ever the haunt of the heart--".⁹⁰ They were great men who were among the

Lights of the world and demigods of fame

'- All the great poems in our language are coloured by Christianity, and the claims of all human beings to the same rights and privileges before God, are not only admitted, but illustrated.' Wilson noted, and as a critic of Thomson, he is sympathetic to the poet and to the patriotism that inspired his genius. His criticism indicates that The Seasons was popular because it eulogised local, regional, and national traits, and exemplified them in descriptive poetry. The examples and illustrations he chooses, and his use of eighteenth-century personification, show that, as Wordsworth had said, the language of the low-born, was the

most figurative. They also point out Thomson's place in the revival of poetry, which draws attention to a particular kind of nature.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Wilson and Burns

In the wake of the Enlightenment, in the early nineteenth century, the cult of the peasant figure became very popular, and many Romantic literary critics saw fit to write about Burns as the embodiment of the spirit of Scotland, and a poet whose name is a 'household word'.¹ Wilson's writings were published at a time when Burns was at his most popular; in the Noctes for April 1829, the Shepherd pays tribute to Christopher North, 'You've written better about Burns, yoursel, sir, nor onybody else breathin'. That you hae - baith better and aftener - and a' friends of the poet ought to be grateful to Christopher North'.² In 1786 The Edinburgh Magazine commented: 'The author is indeed a striking example of native genius bursting through the obscurity of poverty and the obstructions of a laborious life.'³ In The Lounger (97, 9th December, 1798), Henry Mackenzie, The Man of Feeling, noted that the poet had been obliged to leave his native land to seek shelter and support, but hoped that his country would retain and cherish him as he was indispensable for Scotland. For Wilson, writing in the BM, Burns was great because he had made Scotland great, '--We love his poetry the more deeply for the sake of him whose genius has given our native land a new title of honour among the nations.'⁴ His criticism reflects the Scottish poetic tradition and the character of the poet, and are the Romantic judgements of a nineteenth century critic.

Evaluation depended on literary taste, and in the nineteenth century criticism of Burns was one of personality. In the Noctes No. One (March 1822), was the observation,

'--In reviewing, in particular, what can be done without personality? Nothing, nothing. What are books that don't express the personal characters of their authors; and who can review books without reviewing those that wrote them?---Can a man read Burns without having the idea of a great and bold man----'.⁵

Wilson was well qualified to write about Burns's songs and poems. His own pride in his Scots nationality made him a sympathetic critic, and he was familiar with them, and revered the songs with the delight of a kindred spirit. In his essay, The Genius and Character of Burns, Wilson described Burns as a certain type of Scottish poet, proud and independent, 'a

genius of high order⁶, and one 'imbued with vivid perceptions, warm feelings, and strong passions'⁷, and questions whether he was responsible for his fate. He fits an idea of the natural genius, close to nature, and to the universe. Although taken up with discussions on morality and genius, his remarks in BM include a tribute to the songs, and praise for 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', and 'Tam O'Shanter'. He endorsed the view that 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' was Burns's best poem. His criticism reflected his fascination with the contact between imagination and reality, which he believed was exemplified in Burns's poetry. Wilson also fiercely attacked Burns, showing the inconsistency which marred his criticism. 'He wrote like a boor -- he brandished a pen pretty much after the same fashion as he brandished a flail -- You never lose sight of the thresher----'⁸ His principal aim was to draw attention to a national poet, whose destiny was to illustrate the peasant life of Scotland, and he shows a devotion which was almost sentimental.

Wilson's earliest remarks on Burns's criticism are a series of self-contradictory pseudonymous articles in 1806 regarding Wordsworth's reputation. Later, he links Burns's name with Wordsworth's, and makes an important, unfavourable, critical comparison of Hogg and Burns, observing, 'The great glory of James is, that he is as unlike Robert as ever one poet was unlike another'.⁹ He devotes an essay, entitled The Genius and Character of Burns, which was annexed to the Land of Burns in 1841, and another on the Burns Festival 1844; more than he devotes to any other poet. In addition the Shepherd championed Burns in conversations which were reproduced in the Noctes from 1829-1834.

Wilson's unevenness as a critic, which so often manifests itself, and is seen in the taunting of Wordsworth, and his comparison of Hogg and Burns, detracts from his criticism. Therefore, there is particular merit in his comment on Burns in The Genius and Character of Burns, where he does not indulge in contradictions and shows an understanding and feeling for the national character, and Burns as their representative of an educated people, patriotic, proud, and religious in spirit. He had studied the Bible, and the old national ballads, and Wilson particularly notes Burns's religious beliefs, which he held throughout his life,

observing, 'he was religious far beyond the common run of men, even them who may have had a more consistent and better considered creed.'¹⁰

Speaking of Burns's last illness, Wilson states:

But he had his Bible with him in his lodgings and he read it almost continually - often when seated on a bank, from which he had difficulty in rising without assistance, for his weakness was extreme, and in his emaciation he was like a ghost. The fire of his eye was not dimmed - indeed fever had lighted it up beyond even its natural brightness; and though his voice, once so various, was now hollow, his discourse was still that of a Poet. To the last he loved the sunshine, the grass, and the flowers; to the last he had a kind look and word for the passers by, who all knew it was Burns. Laboring men, on their way from work, would step aside to the two or three houses called the Brow, to know if there was any hope of his life; and it is not to be doubted that devout people remembered him, who had written 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', in their prayers. His sceptical doubts no longer troubled him; they had never been more than shadows; and he had at last the faith of a confiding Christian.¹¹

Wilson observed that Burns had 'a bold heart, a bold hand, and a bold tongue'¹² and these characteristics were reflected in his poetry. His 'fine, free, bold, gladsome, generous, and independent nature'¹³ endeared him to the Scottish people. A formidable intellect was matched with equal strength of passion, and, as Wilson remarked, 'Imagination was not the chief faculty of his mind - but intellect. His sensibility was exquisite - he had a heart of passion, a soul of fire - his love of his native land was one with the love of life - and he gloried in having been born a peasant.'¹⁴ In a letter Dugald Stewart wrote, '—all the faculties of Burns's mind were, as far as I could judge, equally vigorous; and his predilections for poetry were rather the result of his own enthusiastic and impassioned temper, than of a genius exclusively adapted to that species of composition.'¹⁵ With his powers of intellect and passion, his creative insight revealed people's deepest thoughts and feelings. His sympathies were 'keen and wide'¹⁶, and 'Imbued with vivid perceptions, warm feelings, and strong passions, he sent his own existence into that of all things, animate and inanimate

around him.¹⁷ This was similar to Wilson's view on genius, observing, 'Genius - one kind of it at least - is transfusion of self into all outward things.'¹⁸ Burns's description of himself indicates very clearly certain aspects of his poetry:

'a strong appetite for sociability, as well as from native hilarity as from pride of observation and remark; a constitutional melancholy or hypochondriasm that made me flee solitude. Add to these incentives to social life my reputation for bookish knowledge, a certain wild logical talent and a strength of thought something like the rudiments of good sense, and it will not seem surprising that I was generally a welcome guest where I visited, or any great wonder that always when two or three met together there I was among them. But far beyond all other impulses of my heart was *un penchant a l'adorable moitie du genre humain*.¹⁹

Although humorous he could be tearful, 'for the flood-gates of Robin's heart often suddenly flung themselves open to a touch, while a rushing gush - wondering gazers knew now why - bedimmed the lustre of his large black eyes.'²⁰ Mirth and melancholy were equal in his mind, and Wilson noted that 'humour in men of genius is always allied to pathos.'²¹ 'He rejoices like an untamed enthusiast, and he weeps like a prostrate penitent. In joy and in grief the whole man appears'²², as Wilson remarked. Like Shakespeare he had the passions, and a deep insight into human existence, and was the greatest poet that sprung out of Scottish soil.

Although Burns was born a poet, Wilson noted that he was also one shaped by nature. He was one of five - Burns, Hogg, Cunningham, Bloomfield and Clare - all 'children of genius, whose souls Nature had framed of the finer clay',²³ but the foremost was Burns. In support of his description of Burns as a 'native genius'²⁴, one who 'manifestly had never deeply studied poetry as an art, nor reasoned much about its principles, nor looked abroad with the wide ken of intellect for objects and subjects on which to pour out his inspiration,²⁵ Wilson endorsed what Burns said of himself in his Preface to the 1786 Kilmarnock editions of his Poems, '--Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule, he sings the sentiments and manners he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language --'²⁶. Wilson recognised that Burns's gift of poetry was

untaught, and his poetic feeling was drawn from life around him, rather than any learning which he acquired from books, and Burns remarked of himself,

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,

That's a' the learning I desire.

But his mastery of words had to be developed and cultivated, and he says in a letter, "Excellence in the profession is the fruit of industry, labour, attention, and pains,"²⁷ He gave himself an English training, and his reading included works of Shakespeare and Pope, Thomson, Shenstone, Sterne, and Mackenzie. As Wilson remarked, regarding the development of his natural genius, 'not a boy in Scotland had a better education.'²⁸ But the most important was '**A COLLECTION OF SONGS**'²⁹ and the use he made of them. He notes,

That Volume was my *vade mecum*. I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is.³⁰

The models he took to follow were in English because the English diction was the acceptable form at that time. He shows the English tradition in his precise observation of the natural world, especially birds, which he describes in vivid language; Wilson described him as 'at once the most accurate and the most poetical of ornithologists.'³¹ This was blended with the Scottish spirit and a wish to copy Fergusson and cultivate the vernacular. Overall, his delight was to embody in verse the visions of his 'inspired fancy'³² and to awaken the sympathies of people whose emotions were the same world-wide.

As a moralist, Wilson was interested in Burns's moral character, and his dealing with fate. He believed fate had assigned him to a hard life, but it was not an unhappy life. As a poet he was 'happy to the full measure of his large heart's desire'³³, and he thought no more of a reward for his poems than the poor mouse in whose fate his sympathetic observation saw his own - but more unfortunate!

Still thou art blest compared wi' me!

and had he possessed them, he could not have written the poetry with which he was associated. Wilson comments,

Thank Heaven, for not having made him such a man - but merely the Ayrshire Ploughman. He was called into existence for a certain work, for the fulness of time was come - but he was neither a Shakespeare, nor a Scott, nor a Goethe and therefore he rejoiced in writing the 'Saturday Night,' and 'The Twa Dogs,' and 'The Holy Fair,' and 'O' a' the Airts the Win' can blow,' and eke 'The Vision.' But forbid it, all ye Gracious Powers! that we should quarrel with Thomas Carlyle - and that, too, for calling Robert Burns one of the greatest of poets and philosophers.⁴¹

The centre of Burns's work, which had made him 'a great National Poet'⁴², Wilson found to be its truth, and Carlyle called his 'sincerity'.⁴³ Whatever were the faults or defects of his poetry, it has 'beyond all that ever was written, this greatest of all merits, intense, life-pervading, and life-breathing truth,'⁴⁴ as shown in his love, humour, indignation, and independence. 'There is no delusion, no affectation, no exaggeration, no falsehood in the spirit of Burns's poetry.'⁴⁵ Burns described his own feelings and emotions, his conflict of passions with the same frankness and truth of description as that around him. 'But the land of truth is ever the haunt of the heart',⁴⁶ as Wilson observed, and Burns described what he observed of people's manners, and their thoughts and feelings. 'It seems as if his muse were loth to admit almost any thought, feeling, image, drawn from any other region than his native district - the hearthstone of his father's hut - the still or troubled chamber of his own generous and passionate bosom.'⁴⁷ The only thing that interested him was 'the burning heart and passions of man'.⁴⁸ His imagination did not have the visionary quality of Shelley, or meditative like Wordsworth, '--it wanted not wings broad and strong for highest flights.'⁴⁹ He used it to reproduce human life and he saw poetry in life around him, revealed in people's customs, loves, and griefs. Wilson observed, 'With a versatility not compatible, perhaps, with a capacity of profoundest emotion, but in his case with extreme tenderness, he could instantly assume, and often on the slightest apparent impulse, some imagined character as completely as if it were his own, and realise its conditions. Or he could imagine himself out of all the circumstances by which his individual life was environed, and to all the emotions

arising from that transmigration, give utterance as lively as the language inspired by his communion with his own familiar world.⁵⁰ Burns believed that, but for "man's inhumanity to man", this might be a much better earth, and he shows his sympathy and understanding for the preserving spirit of the poor, whose feelings place them on a moral level with the most enlightened in the land, and makes them proud of the condition assigned them by Providence.

Although Wilson believed that Burns cared for natural scenery, and felt a passionate response to the spirit of nature, referring to Burns's line, "My heart rejoiced in Nature's joy",⁵¹ he noted that he used it mainly as a background for human emotions and interests. He shows the same accuracy and observation for natural description, around his local Ayr. It was a world 'still lightened by Scottish skies, still melodious with Scottish streams, still inhabited by Scottish life - sweet as reality, dear as truth, yet visionary as fiction's dream, and felt to be in part the work of his own creation.'⁵²

As Wilson noted, 'Knowledge is power'⁵³, and the power of the poet was to express his mind and spirit, and evoke an emotional response from the reader. This was 'the effect of all good poetry - according to its power - of the poetry of Robert Bloomfield as of the poetry of Robert Burns.'⁵⁴ After Burns had discovered his power to 'kindle the sparks of nature wherever they slumbered,'⁵⁵ he was certain that his poetry could not fail to produce the same passion in the hearts of other men as that contained in his own. All people can see and feel what is pointed out by genius, and, as a benefactor, Burns's purpose was to inspire pride and contentment. His poems touch a chord and appeal to the heart, and humble people feel the equal of the highest in the land as all people experience the same feelings - one touch of nature made the whole world kin. As Wilson notes, 'A tender thought of the 'Cottar's Saturday Night,' or a bold thought of 'Scots wha' hae wi' Wallace bled', may come across him; and he who in such a spirit loves home and country, by whose side may he not walk an equal in the broad eye of day as it shines over our Scottish hills?'⁵⁶

Wilson's essay and his selection of poems serve to show readers that Burns is the greatest national poet. Burns had a great love for the country and for its people, and wanted

to be their representative. He also wanted to have their sympathy and praise. 'Through his songs he felt he would survive in the hearts of the dwellers in cottage-homes all over Scotland - and in the fond imagination of his heart Scotland to him was all the world.'⁵⁷ He wished to be among the number of Scottish poets, and the themes chosen in his poetry were those used by his Scottish predecessors, most of all Ramsay and Fergusson 'because they belonged to Scotland, were Scottish in all their looks, and all their language, in the very habits of their bodies, and in the very frame of their souls.'⁵⁸ The poems that were of enduring merit were the ones that Burns was to write in the local Scots, which he had learned from the practice of his predecessors, especially Fergusson. Wilson's appreciative remarks on the Scottish dialect, his references to Ramsay and Fergusson, and his attention to Burns's education, show his closeness to the vernacular school of poetry. In Edinburgh, people were happy to listen 'to the noblest sentiments flowing from the lips of a rustic, sometimes in his own Doric divested of all offensive vulgarity, but oftener in language which, in our northern capital, was thought pure English, and comparatively it was so, for in those days the speech of many of the most distinguished persons would have been unintelligible out of Scotland, and they were proud of excelling in the use of their mother tongue.'⁵⁹ Of his songs, Wilson wrote, 'he wooed each maiden in song that will, as long as our Doric dialect is breathed by love in beauty's ears, be murmured close to the cheek of Innocence trembling in the arms of Passion.'⁶⁰ In the *Noctes* No. Twenty Three (April 1830) there is a defence of the Scottish dialect by the Shepherd in conversation with De Quincey. 'Dinna abuse Burns, Mr. De Quinshy. Neither you nor any ither Englishman can thoroughly understaun 'three sentences o' his poems---'feelin' every breath and every shadow that keeps playin ower a' its syllables, as if by a natural and born instinct' can only be experienced by those who 'had the happiness and the honour o' havin been born and bred in bonny Scotland.'⁶¹

Wilson noted that Burns's own character and moods were in the poems, whether mirthful or melancholy, joyful or grave. His humour showed that he was just as susceptible and as observant of the comic as of the tragic. His tenderness of heart revealed his love for

all things, animate and inanimate. All were concerned with the dignity and worth of man and reflect a sympathy for man as man, for his feelings, his hopes, his aspirations, his repression under a higher order. His satirical compositions mocked anything which he believed undermined and thwarted the natural development of man. The references to nature were less frequent, and appeared as background, where they were blended with moods of mind especially in the love-songs, where they showed the contrast between human despair and nature's joy. Wilson's criticism shows a preference for the poems where he considered Burns's greatness lay, namely the descriptive poems, satires, Epistles, and Songs. Burns's morality stemmed from his religion, and the themes of love and truth are reflected in the religious and moral quality of his poetry. This theme is seen best in 'The Cottar's Saturday Night', of which Wilson said 'There are few more *perfect* poems'⁶², and the one he chose to illustrate the human affections in his lectures. Burns draws a picture of the cotter which moved his brother to tears, and is modelled after Fergusson's 'The Farmer's Ingle'. As Wilson remarked, 'for at 'The Farmer's Ingle' his imagination had kindled into the 'Cottar's Saturday Night',⁶³ and it shows Burns' remembrance touched with emotion as he recalled his own home where his father used to be heard by his son, Robert, every night saying, 'Let us worship God.' Wilson concluded, 'It is felt by us, all through from beginning to end, to be Burns's "Cottar's Saturday Night"'.⁶⁴

The vital connection that Wilson maintained existed between reality and imagination is explored in the poem. The shepherd, in the *Noctes* rejects Thomas Moore's assertion in his 'Life of Byron' that the imaginative faculty is an 'unreal' medium:

Nae man o' a high order of mind, either thinks or feels through 'an unreal medium'. But I'll tell you, sir, what he does - he thinks and feels through a fine medium. He breathes the pure air o' the mountain-top - and he sees through the clear air a' the dwellins o' man - and richt through roofs intil their hearths and their hearts. Did Burns feel and think through an unreal medium, Mister Muir, when, "In glory and in joy,/Followin his plough upon the mountain-side", his soul saw the Cottar's Saturday Night, and in words gave the vision imperishable life? -- for as sure as God is in heaven, and that he has given his word on earth that Picture is a

picture of the Truth, and Burns, in drawing it, saw, felt, and through that real medium, in which alone all that is fairest, loveliest, brichest, best in creation, is made apparent to the eyes o' genius, or permanent in it immortal works.⁶⁵

It is only ' "men o' a *laigh* order o' genius" ' (such as Sterne) who are guilty of cultivating 'a puny, sickly, sensibility - which is averse frae all the realities of life.'⁶⁶

The genre of the poem is a description of Scottish life, and religious devotion observed in a working-class household where worship is regarded as a duty and a blessing. The stanzas were painted by Burns with the feeling of truth and love. 'It is the utterance of a heart whose chords were all tuned to gratitude, "making sweet melody" to the Giver, on a night no less sacred in his eye than his own appointed Sabbath.'⁶⁷ Burns had a strong vein of religious fervour, more the result of feeling than of reason, but sacred to him because of his own early days, and by a reverence for the values of family life. "I recollect once," Dugald Stewart said, speaking of Burns, "he told me, when I was admiring a distant project in one of our morning walks, that the sight of so many smoking cottages gave a pleasure to his mind, which none could understand who had not witnessed, like himself, the happiness and the worth which they contained."⁶⁸ Wilson points out Burns's sympathy and feeling for the home, its charm, and the basis of all society, its family values, and united love and esteem. William Burns was usually heard by his son, Robert, every night duly saying, "Let us worship God". Burns frequently remarked to his brother, Gilbert, that he thought "'There was something peculiarly venerable in the phrase", every time he heard it'⁶⁹ as used by a decent sober head of a family introducing family worship. From this idea, encouraged by the examples of his own 'priest-like'⁷⁰ father, came 'The Cottar's Saturday Night', which reflects the Scottish values of religion and virtue. It uses the Spenserian stanza which probably suits his sublime theme, and is the one which shows the sacredness of the ties of earth and heaven.

The introductory verse contains the dedication to Burns's friend, Aitken, where he describes himself as "no mercenary Bard", and the poem opens with "November chill blows loud wi' angry sigh". This first stanza is in itself a picture, or a poem, of the poor man's life, as Wilson points out the homely images and their associations and our response to these. It describes the "toil-worn Cottar", collecting his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes, and "weary

o'er the moor", bending his course homewards. Even in the face of November he has to work, but the days are shortening as the year draws to a close, and all living creatures have their hour of rest; the "miry beasts" will soon be in their stalls; "the black'ng train o' craws" be silent on their perch, and the cottar, too, will have rest. The effect is one of contentment, as religion offers release, 'hoping the Morn in ease and rest to spend', and the promise of a Sabbath.

Then comes the picture of the cottar's humble home, cheered by the presence of his wife and children, who complete the family circle. 'The fifth and sixth stanzas and the eighteenth', says Gilbert, 'thrilled through my soul with peculiar ecstasy'⁷¹. These describe, as Wilson points out, in homeliest words, the home's familiar doings and the family worship. It deals with "the language of the soul"⁷², which comes from the heart and records the highest thoughts that can ascend in application to the throne of God. It is a universal relationship of the soul with its Maker. If readers wish to know why the eighteenth stanza thrilled Gilbert, it is because it is a religious entreaty, and reflects the religious character of the peasant, devout, earnest, and virtuous. It is typical of the country's nobility, and justified its position, and awakens in the reader a patriotic pride in his country, and a conviction that 'From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs.'⁷³ For Wilson, this patriotic effusiveness shows the brethren among the best of their country's sons, seen in the lines, 'O, Scotia! my dear, my native soil!'⁷⁴ and 'O Thou! who pour'd the patriotic tide ---'⁷⁵.

The effect of simple family worship lifts the home above material cares, and elevates it into a place of holiness more sacred to Burns than the pomp of a palace. The harmony of the poem is disturbed by some faults in two of the stanzas, which Wilson wishes never had been written. He condemns Burns's attack on Italian music as 'a most ignorant violation of the truth'⁷⁶, believing Italians are naturally musical, and also his moral nature 'revolts with a sense of injustice from the comparison of the wickedness of one class with the goodness of another'.⁷⁷ The latter was an error of judgement over feeling. The spirit of Christian worship should be truth, whether held in a Cathedral, Kirk, or Cottage.

The overall response felt by the reader is one of gratitude. It was the only poem where the religious and poetical spirit is blended, and Wilson wished Burns had written more

in this vein, which was more suitable to his talents, than his tendency to please the whim of the people by writing unsuitable material. Its effect was not so much one of pleasure, but rather of moral guidance as it struck a chord in the heart. As Wilson observed, '---there is in that immortal poem a depth of domestic joy - an intensity of the feeling of home - a presiding spirit of love - and a lofty enthusiasm of religion, which are all peculiarly Scottish, and beyond the pitch of mind of any other people.'⁷⁸ Contemporary critics were equally enthusiastic; Lockhart noted that it was the one poem the Collection could least do without, and Hazlitt commented, it 'is a noble and pathetic picture of human manners, mingled with a fine religious awe. It comes over the mind like a slow and solemn strain of music.'⁷⁹ In the twentieth century, Crawford praised it as one of the best descriptions of Scottish life.

Further touches of simple Christian tenderness are seen in the poem written on turning up a mouse's nest with a plough. 'To a Mountain Daisy', are verses issued from a heart 'too often steeped in the waters of bitterness'⁸⁰, caused by his, apparently, unsuccessful love for Jean Armour. Other poems which indicate the same sentiment of feeling are 'The Lament', 'The Address to his old Mare', and 'A Winter's Night'. Wilson tells us that it was from Burns's brother that we learn that 'The Lament' was composed "after the first distraction of his feelings had a little subsided."⁸¹ Burns said that the poem was 'the Lament on the unfortunate issue of a Friend's Amour'⁸² to disguise his own situation. It was a poem 'overflowing with the expression of every passion cognate with love's despair'.⁸³ The misery of suffering is matched to the deep music in this poem. In all high natures, suffering both strengthens and purifies. The same passions of his loss are present, but they have been ennobled by the tenderness and elevation of the finest poetry, which has transformed and idealised them, and 'subdued down to the beautiful and pathetic, the expression of what otherwise had been agony and despair'⁸⁴ The closest parallel to this theme is the celebration of a rival love, 'To Mary in Heaven'.

Wilson is reminded of the words of 'A Winter Night' when sheltering in a hut during a snowstorm, and notes that, although simple, they are charged with 'profound pathos'.⁸⁵

List'ning the doors an' winnocks rattle;
 I think me on the ourie cattle,
 Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle
 O' winter war,
 And thro' the drift, deep-lairing sprattle
 Beneath a scaur!

He agrees that the one single door of the hut does indeed 'rattle' by starts as the storm attacks it. His thoughts turn to the shepherds outside, who have to endure all the elements, and are exposed to 'a realm of wrath-woe-danger, and death'.⁸⁶ But it breeds and develops the character of men whose blood, when the bagpipe blows, is 'prodigally poured forth on a thousand shores'.⁸⁷ The shepherds laugh at the storm, and think only of "the ourie cattle" and "silly sheep", and their suffering, and 'man's reason goes to the help of brute instinct'.⁸⁸ As Wilson points out, God's hand is always present in any mission of mercy, and they are obeying an errand from a higher presence. He notes in all Burns's poetry, 'what an overflowing of tenderness, pity, and affection towards all living creatures that inhabit the earth, the water, and the air!'⁸⁹

Wilson noted that Burns was distinguished for his 'exceeding tenderness of heart'⁹⁰, and for his humour. Unbidden, the Comic Muse came to him, and it was 'in the Humorous, the Comic, the Satirical, that he first tried and proved his strength'.⁹¹ His success in this field lay in 'the pleasure of sympathy and the pride of power'.⁹² The key note is laughter, whether simple or compound, pure laughter, or a mixture of laughter and contempt, even of indignation and scorn, but laughter still being the chief ingredient that qualified the whole. Traits of this appear in 'The Holy Fair'. The 'Halloween', 'Scotch Drink', and several of his songs, but the best of this genre is probably 'Tam o' Shanter'.

'Halloween' was a moving description of local superstition, captured in a poem of 'infinite spirit and vivacity'⁹³, in which Burns has sketched the various customs and charms and spells by which young people could look into their matrimonial future. It was the night "when witches, devils, and other mischief-making beings, are all abroad on their baneful midnight errands; particularly those aerial people the fairies are said on that night to hold a grand anniversary"⁹⁴. So writes Burns in a note, but in the poem evil spirits are disarmed of their terror, and fear is made fun. The festival was simply kept alive by the 'poetic power of superstition'⁹⁵, and this was the source of their enjoyment rather than strong drink. As Wilson commented, all worldly cares had been forgotten, and, '---the hopes, fears, and wishes that most agitate every human breast, and are by the simplest concealed, here exhibit themselves without disguise in the freedom not only permitted but inspired by the passion that rules the night - "the passion," as Burns himself wrote, "of prying into futurity, which makes a striking part of the history of human nature in its rude state, in all ages and nations; and it may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind, if any such should honour the author with a perusal, to see the remains of it among the more unenlightened of our own."⁹⁶ Burns recognised that this fascination with the supernatural, and its charms and spells, was a part of nature which had been awakened that night in the 'simple souls'⁹⁷. He therefore delays all "creature comforts"⁹⁸ until the end, when 'the curtain has dropped on that visionary stage'⁹⁹, and people have returned to the normal everyday world. Then,

Syne, wi' a social glass o' strunt,

They parted aff careerin

Fu' blithe that night.

It is the humorous side of these superstitious practices that Burns aims to bring out in the poem, but Wilson observes that there is nothing very poetical in the character of its superstitions. Burns had treated the whole subject with 'a sarcastic good-humour'¹⁰⁰, and had only seen it as an opportunity for the exhibition of 'mere human feelings, and passions, and characters'.¹⁰¹

The reverse of Burns's religious feelings are seen in his religious satires. He disliked hypocrisy, and felt the present religion stifled freedom. 'Holy Willie's Prayer' is an attack on the opposite kind of religion to that described in 'The Cottar's Saturday Night'. It has been described as 'perhaps the finest of Burns's satirical poetry'.¹⁰² Burns directs his 'battery of ridicule'¹⁰³ against '---certain ministers whose Calvinism he thought was not Christianity; whose characters were to him odious, their persons ridiculous, their manners in the pulpit irreverent, and out of it absurd.'¹⁰⁴ He draws a satirical picture of Holy Willie, who symbolises the 'hypocritical pretenders to sanctity, and the strong - lunged bellowers who laid claim to the gifts of grace'¹⁰⁵, its exclusiveness, and one-to-one relationship of the soul with its Maker. The posturing of Holy Willie, which is intended to be comical, is underlined by his hypocrisy as his worldly mind condemns other people's worldliness. Holy Willie's mind and the twists and turns as he seeks to justify his repentance, while not excusing further lapses, is humorous. There is laughter, in which Burns can join as he shares the comic effect of his eloquence. Holy Willie's character is shaped by his Calvinism and elaborated as a 'finished picture'¹⁰⁶.

Wilson questions Burns's point of view, and asks if it was wicked? He observed, 'Wicked we think too strong a word; but we cannot say that it was not reprehensible, for to all sweeping satire there must be some exception - and exaggeration cannot be truth.'¹⁰⁷ He noted that his ridicule was free from malignity, although he admitted that Burns had, by his irregularities, incurred ecclesiastical censure, and possible personal spite barbed the sting of his satire. Wilson recalled an occasion several years after Burns's death, in his boyhood, when he himself had seen and heard more than one of those worthies¹⁰⁸, and he did not feel that Burns's descriptions were 'greatly overcharged'¹⁰⁹. It was 'an extraordinary exhibition of divine worship. We never can think it sinful that Burns should have been humorous on such a pulpit, and if we shudder at some of the verses in which he seems yet alive, it is not at the satirist.'¹¹⁰

Scott described the poem as 'a piece of satire more exquisitely severe than any which Burns ever afterwards wrote, but unfortunately cast in a form too daringly profane to be received into Dr Currie's collection.'¹¹¹ Wilson asks if Burns had dared beyond Milton,

Goethe, and Byron? He had put a Prayer to the Almighty into the mouth of one whom he believes to be one of the lowest of blasphemers. He further observed that 'Milton's blasphemer is a fallen angel, Goethe's a devil, Byron's the first murderer, and Burns's an elder of the Kirk'.¹¹² Milton alone was exonerated because the 'high significance'¹¹³ of his conception of Satan 'cannot be misunderstood by the pious, and that out of the mouths of the dwellers in darkness, as well as of the sons of the Morning "he vindicates the ways of God to man"¹¹⁴. Byron's Cain blasphemes, and many have thought that Byron also blasphemes, and Goethe in the 'Prologue in Heaven' brings Mephistopheles face to face with God. It was, therefore, not fair to blame Burns for the "daringly profane form"¹¹⁵ in which 'Holy Willie's Prayer' is written, without reprobating the 'Prologue in Heaven'.

Burns's own ardent temperament shines in 'Tam o' Shanter' and overflows in a torrent of vivid description and satirical humour. Hazlitt called it a 'masterpiece'¹¹⁶, and Carlyle says it is 'not so much a poem, as a piece of sparkling rhetoric'.¹¹⁷ Wordsworth noted that, '...while these various elements of humanity are blended into one proud and happy composition of elated spirits, the anger of the tempest without doors only heightens and sets off the enjoyment within'.¹¹⁸ Wilson admired the state of mind which could still enjoy fun and frolic in the face of adversity. 'Sitting on a turf-dyke, in a state of ecstatic enjoyment',¹¹⁹ Burns had written the poem between breakfast and dinner to while away his work in the fields. 'Never did genius go at such a gallop',¹²⁰ as Wilson recorded. Dryden had written his 'Alexander's Feast' quickly, but 'Tam o' Shanter' was superior in force and fire to that Ode. Wilson did not consider it as a story, as it is 'all made out of the builder's brain'¹²¹ and was 'the dull lie of a drunkard dotard'¹²². But, it was 'a perfect poem, impregnated with the native spirit of Scottish superstition'.¹²³ Wilson disagreed with Carlyle that it does not strike an inner chord, believing that it does strike a chord of superstition, one that 'twangs strangely',¹²⁴ and whose meaning was unclear.

Wilson opens his criticism on an ironic note. 'We know not what some great German genius like Goethe might have made of him; but we much mistake the matter, if Tam o'Shanter at Alloway Kirk be not as exemplary a piece of humanity as Faustus on May-

day Night upon the Hartz Mountains.¹²⁵ The poem begins with a description of the 'drowthy'¹²⁶ hero, Tam, who is the principal character, and has been given glimpses of the invisible world. His wife calls him

A skellum,

A bletherin, Blusterin, drunken blellum;

The scene reveals his character, and prepares us for what might happen.

She prophesied that, late or soon,

Thou wad be found deep drown'd in Doon;

By Alloway's auld haunted kirk.

A vivid picture is drawn of social enjoyment at the inn and the characters assembled there, and the shared pleasures of flowing drink, laughter, and sensual liberties taken, all of which Wordsworth maintained had no moral purpose but has a moral effect,

Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,

O'er a' the ills o' life victorious.

Wilson disagrees with the opinion of this 'wise and benign'¹²⁷ judge, that "there was no moral purpose in all this, though there is a moral effect".¹²⁸ The whole poem is about the transience of human happiness, that pleasures do not last, and that they have to be paid for. Moved by the picture he had 'so vividly imagined'¹²⁹ and using imagery of 'unequalled loveliness'¹³⁰ Burns illustrates 'a universal and everlasting truth'.¹³¹

But pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flo'r, its bloom is shed;

Or like the snowfall in the river,

A moment white - then melts for ever;

Or like the borealis race,

That flit ere you can point their place;

Or like the rainbow's lovely form,

Evanishing amid the storm.

Tam has enjoyed his pleasures and now he has to set out on the journey home, riding alone in a storm, and exposed to the forces of darkness and its ominous associations.

Wilson remarked that we cannot help feeling sorry for him 'mountin' his beast on sic a night'¹³², and Tam forgets Souter Johnny - how "conjugal fidelity archly bent to the service of general benevolence"¹³³, as the 'philosophical'¹³⁴ Wordsworth speaks of.

The landlady and Tam grew gracious

Wi' favours, secret, sweet, and precious;

Tam remembers Kate's prophecy and her advice as the haunted ruin draws near. As he gallops, scenes of past tragedies flash by, and show how fast he rode. Wilson reminds us that we forget we are not riding behind him. Then, the sight of Kirk Alloway is seen, lit up, but instead of a welcoming sight, Tam discovers it is occupied by supernatural elements, witches and warlocks. There is music and dancing, and Wilson defies any one to ask who these witches and warlocks are, and why they are present in Alloway Kirk.

This night, a child might understand,

The deil had business on his hand;

Wilson asks what business? Possibly a ball? But he questions further how Tam, "glorious" and "heroic"¹³⁵ could stand the sight of open coffins in which the dead occupants each held a candle. The effect of such a dreadful sight would usually cause the viewer to faint, or to be beyond feeling fear. The dancing of the witches was ludicrous and horrible, but Tam was gazing, fascinated, as he was 'bedevilled, bewarlocked, and bewitched'¹³⁶. He was, therefore, able to note the presence of bodies stretched out on the Holy Table, as 'they had received a summons to the festival which murderer and murdered must obey'¹³⁷ and various murder weapons, including five tomahawks, five scimitars, a garter, and a knife. But Tam could not see what we see. The flaw in the poem, Wilson felt, was that Tam could only look with his bodily eyes and see what had been shown him. He did not possess supernatural powers, and nobody had told him 'that *that* garter had strangled a babe', and 'that *that* was a patricide's knife'¹³⁸. Burns knew this, and believed Tam knew it too; we know it because Burns tells us, and the poet himself is the only real warlock of them all.

The tone of the second half of the poem is lighter and suitable for the tradition in which Burns wrote. He had no intention of carrying his readers 'back into that dark, earnest, wondering age, when the tradition was believed, and when it took its rise.'¹³⁹ The moral is

that human happiness is always transitory, and that a price is exacted for the enjoyment of human pleasures. Tam's over-indulgence costs him a nightmarish ride, from the comforts of an inn to the presence of the chambers of hell itself. Here he meets the wicked, who 'feed upon the dead, not merely because they love wickedness, but because they inspire it into the quick'.¹⁴⁰ The devil is in charge, and 'Who ever murdered his father but at the instigation of that "towzie tyke, black, grim, and large?" Who but for him ever strangled her new-born child?'¹⁴¹ Scimitars and tomahawks were never used in Scotland, but they were in use in the wilderness of the western world and in the orient, and the devil's empire knows no bounds.

The poem clearly illustrates Burns's faculty of mixing humorous descriptions with serious sublime imagery. He passes from a scene of the lowest humour, to a situation of the most awful and terrible. Wilson lightens the serious side by emphasising the humour, which he shows by debasing the supernatural and humanising it. He notes 'the principal power lies in the character and situation of that 'drowthy' hero; the Devil himself, playing on his bag-pipes in the window-neuk, is little more than a human piper, rather more burly than common; and while the witches and warlocks are mere old men and women, who continue to dance after 'jigging-time is o'er', the young witch, 'with the sark of se'enteen hunder linnen,' is a buxom country lass to all intents and purposes, and considered by 'Tam' in a very alluring but very simple and human light.'¹⁴² The description of the horrors of the scene had always seemed, in Wilson's opinion, 'over-charged, and caricatured so as to become shocking rather than terrible. One touch of Shakespeare's imagination is worth all that laborious and heavy accumulation of affrightments.'¹⁴³

Wilson praised the 'pregnant'¹⁴⁴ poetical Epistles of Burns to his friends, Sillar, Lapraik, Simpson, Smith for their 'fine poetry'¹⁴⁵, their revelation of his 'noble and generous character'¹⁴⁶, and the 'genial pictures'¹⁴⁷ of social customs that they portray. They reveal the sincerity of his various friendships, and in them he airs his joys and ambitions as a poet, and his philosophy of life. His ambitions were poured out in verse so full of 'force and fire'¹⁴⁸ that of themselves they were justified for him to declare himself a poet, after the

nature of Scotland. He considered those to Graham of Fintry and to Davie, a fellow poet, as among the best. Burns was indebted to Graham for his position as an exciseman and a gauger. The 'Epistle to Graham' was written in the style of Dryden and Pope, and was 'a noble composition'¹⁴⁹. The 'fine, vigorous, rough, and racy'¹⁵⁰ lines truly expressed his independence and his gratitude. The 'Epistle to Davie' had encouraged him to become an author because of Gilbert's praise. He admired it because, 'it breathes a noble spirit of independence, and of proud contentment dallying with the hardships of its lot, and in the power of manhood regarding the riches that are out of its reach, without a particle of envy, and with a haughty scorn.'¹⁵¹ The 'Epistle to the schoolmaster of Ochiltree' predicts his own fame, as a poet. Burns liked schoolmasters, noting that knowledge, talent, and integrity, was found along with originality and strength of character. He believed that they were 'a meritorious and ill-rewarded class of men'.¹⁵² The 'Epistle to Lapraik' praised his mental qualities, which were exaggerated by Burns, in the enthusiasm of his generous nature.

Various 'absurd things'¹⁵³ had been said about Burns's letter-writing. He had never considered letter-writing a species of composition subject to rules of taste and criticism, choosing, instead, to express his own feelings and particular mood at the time of writing. In Wilson's view they were 'eloquent compositions'¹⁵⁴, not simple, but rich in fancy and overflowing in feeling, and 'dashed off, every other paragraph, with easy boldness of a great master, conscious of his strengths even at times when, of all things in this world, he was least solicitous about display.'¹⁵⁵

The same tenderness of heart is found in Burns's songs. They show Wilson's sensitivity to the lyrical strain. Wilson regarded Burns as the first of all our song-writers after the Irish melodies of Thomas Moore, and felt that his reputation will depend on his songs, and he will become the 'immortal'¹⁵⁶ Burns, and his poems 'household and sheephould'¹⁵⁷ words. The spirit that animated his genius had given birth to perhaps its 'finest effusions - HIS MATCHLESS SONGS.'¹⁵⁸ The romantics were especially interested in the emotion expressed in the lyric form, and identified it with the concept of the inner

man. The present age was what Wilson called the 'Silver Age of Song'¹⁵⁹ and 'gracious Providence placed Burns in the midst of the sources of Lyrical Poetry - when he was born a Scottish peasant.'¹⁶⁰ In the Noctes the Shepherd praises Burns's songs:

---It was heaven's will that in them he should transcend a' the
minnesingers o' this world. But they're too perfectly beautiful to be
envied by mortal man - therefore let his memory in them be hallowed for
evermore.¹⁶¹

The character of a song must be simple, but the simplest feelings are the deepest, and once they have been given expression then they live forever in the heart. Wilson distinguishes between 'Scotland's old pathetic melodies'¹⁶², and her 'light and airy measures'¹⁶³, and notes of the songs, 'In their mournfulness are they not almost like the wail of some bird distracted on the bush from which its nest has been harried, and then suddenly flying away for ever into the woods? In their joyfulness, are they not almost like the hymn of some bird, that love-stricken suddenly darts from the tree top down to the caresses that flutter through the spring?'¹⁶⁴ As a form, Wilson considered that, 'The most undefinable of all undefinable kinds of poetical inspiration are surely - SONGS.'¹⁶⁵

As Wilson noted, Burns had read songs when young, and then sung them out in the fields. Song-writing developed as an art in Edinburgh and became the greatest joy of his life. Wilson observed, 'often had he sung aloud "old songs that are the music of the heart", and some day or other to be able himself to breathe such strains, had been his dearest, his highest ambition. His "genius and his moral frame" were thus imbued with the spirit of our old traditionary ballad poetry; and as soon as all his manifold passions were ripe, and his whole glorious being in full maturity, the voice of song was on all occasions of deepest and tenderest human interest, the voice of his daily, his nightly speech.'¹⁶⁶ As it was a 'divine gift'¹⁶⁷ he felt he could not accept payment for the songs. He contributed, by writing or rewriting, between three hundred and four hundred songs for Thomson who was producing The Scots Musical Museum. The power of the lyric was its ability to go direct to the heart of man, unlike, or as hardly any other art form does, and Wilson noted that Burns had gone straight to the heart of Scotland, and of the world. He comments, 'Assuredly, Burns is felt to

be a Scotchman *intus et in cute* in all his poetry; but not more even in his 'Tam o' Shanter' and 'Cottar's Saturday Night,' his two longest and most elaborate compositions, than in one and all of his numerous and inimitable songs, from 'Dainty Davie' to 'Thou lingering star'. We know, too, that the composition of songs was to him a perfect happiness that continued to the close of life. - an inspiration that shot its light and heat, it may be said, within the very borders of his grave.¹⁶⁸

Wilson shows Burns's skill as a craftsman in three ways; first, his dwelling on the past, and his relation to the vernacular tradition of song; second, his talent for setting words to music; third the place of songs in the social and political movement. Burns carried on a tradition that was already present in Scotland. He had read the older poets, especially Fergusson and Ramsay, because they were of Scotland, and he wrote more with ease and presence in the vernacular, although he took lessons from the English poets. He had studied the spirit of the Scottish ballads in order to marry them to verse.

These old songs were his models, because they were models of certain forms of feeling having a necessary and eternal existence. Feel as those who breathed them felt, and if you utter your feelings, the utterance is a song. Burns did feel as they felt, and looked with the same eyes on the same objects. So entirely was their language his language, that all the beautiful lines, and half lines, and single words, that, because of something in them more exquisitely true to nature, had survived all the rest of the compositions to which they had long ago belonged, were sometimes adopted by him, almost unconsciously it might seem, in his finest inspirations; and oftener still sounded in his ear like a key-note, on which he pitched his own plaintive tune of the heart, till the voice and language of the old and new days were but as one; and the maiden who sung to herself the song by her wheel, or on the brae, quite lost in a wavering world of phantasy, could not, as she smiled, choose but also weep!¹⁶⁹

This tendency to include the spirit of antiquity in the composition gave the lyrics a 'more touching character'¹⁷⁰, in Wilson's opinion, than could ever have originally belonged to them. For Wilson, the importance of the old Scotch ballad was the national feeling it evoked

as it connects present speaker, or singer, in a way, though "mournful, yet pleasant to the soul"¹⁷¹, with past generations, and awakens a love at once more tender and more imaginative towards "auld Scotland."¹⁷²

The variety of songs can be classed into drinking songs, national songs, and love songs. The "rhapsodies respecting drinking"¹⁷³ had an earlier precedent with the tradition seen in Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, who had 'gracefully and gaily thrown off'¹⁷⁴ some of the finest of these, and in Scotland, too, as in Greece, genius had obtained inspiration from the wine-cup. Burns was believed to have shown in them some of his personal character. There were not half-a-dozen, if that, drinking songs in all Burns, as Wilson observed. The chief was 'Willie brewed a peck o' Maut', and so far from inducing people to believe Burns was addicted to drinking, the 'freshness and fervour'¹⁷⁵ of its enthusiasm convinced one that it came gushing from a heart which had already been stimulated by friendship and did not need the additional fortification of strong drink. Wilson observed that Wordsworth regarded the song 'with the complacency of a philosopher'¹⁷⁶, knowing full well that it is all 'a pleasant exaggeration'.¹⁷⁷

Burns praised whisky as 'one of the staffs of life which had been struck from the poor man's hand by fiscal oppression'¹⁷⁸. Wilson pointed out that the word 'tea' was never mentioned in Burns's poems. In the song, 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer to the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons', he shows a comparison between "half-starved slaves in warmer skies"¹⁷⁹, who like their wine and Burns's own people who prefer malt spirit. There is a comical description of the Scotsman,

But bring a Scotsman frae his hill,
Clap in his cheek a Highland gill,
Say, such is Royal George's will,
An there's the foe,
He has nae thought but how to kill
Twa at a blow.

This comparison is continued in 'Scotch Drink' which presents familiar scenes of humble life, whether at work or play. Liquor, in its own right, is praised, and its stimulating effect observed on people at work, as for example, the blacksmith.

The national sentiment that helped to strengthen the ties of heart and land are seen in the songs inspired by patriotism. There are only two war-songs, 'Scots Wha Hae' and 'Song of Death', but, as Wilson observed, 'Not all the orators of the day, in Parliament or out of it, in all their speeches put together embodied more political wisdom, or appealed with more effective power to the noblest principles of patriotism in the British heart.'¹⁸⁰ As Wilson showed, the origin of the war-song is 'home-grown and home-spun'¹⁸¹, and it floats in the air like a banner on which "the ruddy Lion ramps in gold."¹⁸² He has particular praise for 'Scots Wha Hae' regarding it as 'the Grandest Ode out of the Bible'¹⁸³. It is a sublime Ode, and possesses the power of 'stirring up into a devouring fire the *perfervidum ingenium Scotorum*'¹⁸⁴. Sympathy inspires national sentiment, and Death and Life are one and the same to the heroes. The lines are stirringly patriotic, and together with their striking tune they carry their sentiment into the heart of Scottish patriotism. Possibly sympathy for the French Revolution was partly responsible for the production of this song. In 1793, thoughts of Liberty and Independence were in his mind, and Burns connected the theme with an old tune believed to have been Robert Bruce's march at the Battle of Bannockburn. Wilson notes two contrary opinions regarding its composition: John Syme asserted that Burns composed the song while in his company in a storm on the 31 July 1793, on the moor road between Kenmure and Gatehouse. As Wilson maintained, Burns was a remarkable man, but to compose a song "in thunder, lightning, and in rain"¹⁸⁵, showed 'such self possession as few possess.'¹⁸⁶ Burns, writing to Thomson, the following September, says he composed it in his 'yesternight's evening walk'¹⁸⁷ to save himself the trouble of entering into any detail of his previous study of the subject, rather than that Syme had told an actual lie.

The dearest songs to the people are the passionate and the pathetic, and Wilson has particular praise of the Love Songs, believing their prominence was due to their purity. In these, Burns had shown that 'all that is best in his own being delights to bring itself into

communion with all that is best in theirs who he visions as walking before him in beauty.¹⁸⁸ He noted, too, 'if love inspired his poetry, then poetry inspired his love, and not only inspired but elevated the whole nature of it.'¹⁸⁹ Of all his productions, these showed 'thoughts that breathe, and words that burn - and in that wedded verse and music you feel that "love is heaven, and heaven is love!"¹⁹⁰ Many of his pathetic Love-songs are untinged with earthly desire, and these make the most impression, such as the beautiful lines

Wilt thou be my dearie?
 When sorrow wrings thy gentle heart,
 Wilt thou let me cheer thee?
 By the treasure of my soul,
 That's the love I bear thee!
 I swear and vow, that only thou
 Shalt ever be my dearie.

Wilson felt that 'Nothing can be more exquisitely tender - passionless from the excess of passion - pure from very despair; love yet hopes for love's confession, though it feels it can be but a word of pity to sweeten death.'¹⁹¹ This was 'different, yet how congenial'¹⁹² to another strain of love, including the pleasure of former days, as in the lines,

We'll sleep together at the foot
 John Anderson, my jo!

In these poems Burns showed that he could illustrate the whole range of mind, through sympathy.

The beauties of rural nature are associated with the passions and emotions of the mind, and Wilson points out the gentle emotion with which he associates descriptions of nature. Love is portrayed not as it is observed, but as it is felt. His 'trained sensibility'¹⁹³ produced an idealised loveliness, whose soul was innocence, as, for example, 'Highland Mary' and 'Address to Mary in Heaven'. They express sweetly enough some natural sentiment, and Wilson asks what more is required in a song? The effect of the class of the 'simply pleasant'¹⁹⁴ was 'like that of a gentle light falling on a pensive place, when there are no absolute clouds in the sky, and no sun visible either, but when that soft effusion, we know

not whence, makes the whole day that had been somewhat sad, serene, and reminds us that it is summer.'¹⁹⁵

There are several reasons why Burns emerged as a force at this time. First, historical; there was a revival of Scottish national poetry, and Burns was the continuation of a tradition which had begun with Wordsworth and Cowper. Second, political; sympathies with the French revolution were strengthening national feelings and enforcing ideas of liberty and independence. Third, religious; the country was being driven 'half-mad'¹⁹⁶ with the current debate on Calvinism; fourth, Burns was a man of the people, who identified with them and understood their character and shared their joys and sorrows.

Wilson has little comment on the influence of Burns's poetry, noting only that his fame had crossed the Tweed, and that, although a knowledge of his poetry could not have been prevalent over England, he had 'ardent admirers'¹⁹⁷ among the cultivated classes. Before their eyes, he had opened out a vision of a new and beautiful world of rustic life, although written in a language 'but imperfectly understood.'¹⁹⁸

Wilson's judgements are important for the influence they had, since Wilson was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. They have critical value, and critics varied in their assessment. A contemporary critic, R. Turnbull, considered Wilson's criticisms to be 'the richest garland yet wreathed around the poet's brow'¹⁹⁹. He was 'a distinguished writer'²⁰⁰, and had blended 'the finest discrimination with the largest charity.'²⁰¹ He hoped that the Literature of Scotland would be long guarded by such a critic. Andrew Lang regarded the criticism of Burns by Keats, as infinitely superior to the that of Christopher North, and the worst fate that could befall Burns was to become a Professor of Moral Philosophy, comparable with Professor Wilson. A twentieth-century critic, D. Low, considered Wilson had sentimentalised Burns, and A. Noble accused him of duplicity, by politically supporting the class that Burns condemned.

Wilson felt that Burns would be particularly identified with the poem 'The Cottar's Saturday Night', and for his songs. The spirit of poetry is akin to that of religion, and the union of the two is in no human composition more powerful than in this poem. It was Wilson's view that Burns had been sent to embody musically the inner life, the faith, or soul, of Scotland. Like Shakespeare, he had the singing voice and the seeing eye, and the quality of his creative insight was a measure of his own morality. What he had done, Wilson states, 'His genius purified and ennobled in his imagination and in his heart the character and condition of the Scottish peasantry and reflected them, ideally true to nature, in the living waters of Song.'²⁰² "Let who may have the making of the laws, give me the making of the ballads of a people," is a profound saying'²⁰³ and Burns had opened people's minds and hearts through music to Scotland's heritage. In his book of poems possessors have 'a talisman that awakens in a moment all the sweet visions of the past'.²⁰⁴ He carried a message of love and truth, and the spirit of his songs would always live in people's hearts. This was the test of true popularity and everlasting fame. As Wilson remarks, 'No country in the world but Scotland could have produced such a man; and he will be for ever regarded as the glorious representative of the genius of his country.'²⁰⁵

CHAPTER NINE

Wilson and Shakespeare

Wilson wrote his principal Shakespearean criticism in the Dies Boreales between 1849 and 1852. Earlier reviews are Letters on Shakespeare. No. 1 On Hamlet, February 1818; Observations on Mr. Campbell's Essay on English Poetry, May 1819; and The Character of Hamlet, November 1828. In addition, there are various references to and quotations from Shakespeare's plays throughout Wilson's writings, and Shakespeare is the poet next to Wordsworth whom Wilson quotes most frequently. H.H. Furness, in the new Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, praises him as one of the 'master-minds'¹ of Shakespearean criticism, and a modern critic, A.L. Strout, noted 'his enthusiasm and reverence for Shakespeare along with his exentric brilliance and the frequent unconventionality of his appreciation; his versatility and range along with his jocosity and unexpectedness.'² Although the emotional criticism emphasises his unevenness, and central flaw of a lack of a tie-beam, as a Shakespearean critic, Wilson's interest in the passions shows his kinship with romantic critics.

Wilson regarded the imagination as very important, and therefore it is not surprising that he has little regard for his critical predecessors, who upheld neo-classical principles. In 1831 appeared an article in BM:

By much criticism, sincerely or affectedly philosophical, has the genius of Shakespeare been lately laboured, by true men and pretenders -- from Coleridge and Lamb, to Hazlitt and Barry Cornwall. But, after all, with the exception of some glorious things said by the Ancient Mariner and Elia, little new has been added, of much worth, to the Essays of Professor Richardson, a forgotten work, of which a few copies have been saved by thieves from the moths.³

He has particular contempt for Johnson and Dryden, 'Theirs is a strange kind of reverence ---'⁴ He described Johnson as 'one of the truly great men of England'⁵, but he

'comprehended not, in full, the genius of the greatest of poets. He passed from reverence to disdain - from wonder to contempt - measuring all he found there by the standard of his own experience "of man, of nature, and of human life", forgetting that what he judged was Inspiration.'⁶ It was the difference of a judicial and an interpretative criticism. He later notes Johnson's sympathy with Shakespeare, 'He has a soul that sees into Shakespeare.'⁷ But Shakespeare was a great poet - and Johnson was a moralist.

Critics looked for what interested them in Shakespeare, and as a moral philosopher, Wilson follows Coleridge who uses the power of the imagination to produce a moral vision, and a philosophy and view of life. As Wilson notes,

--- We take up a play and ideas

come rolling in upon us like waves impelled by a strong wind -----⁸

Shakespeare's poetry should be read in a religious spirit, and our moral knowledge increased. Shakespeare was 'divine' and along with Milton, one of our greatest moral teachers. Wilson does not separate Reason and Imagination; thought is present in every imaginative activity, and every moral action. All poetry has a moral foundation; it is 'imagination building upon the great, deep, universal, eternal will. Therefore profound sympathy with man, aided by, or growing out of that profound sympathy, is vital to the true poet.'⁹ The philosopher-poets are 'the teachers of a lofty and tender wisdom, as moral prophets to the species'.¹⁰ All poetry should delight and instruct, but critics recognised that different kinds of poetry achieved their common objectives by different means and under different conditions.

Wilson owned a twelve-volume Charles edition of Shakespeare's works, and he came to know the poet through his readings and studies as a classical scholar, where he wrote of his youthful admiration that he had 'worshipped and wept at Shakespeare's grave.'¹¹ While a student at Oxford he had the opportunity, also, to come to know Shakespeare with his visits to the theatre where Shakespearean plays were performed, and he recalled a memorable impression of seeing the acting of John Kemble in Richard III in his boyhood. As a critic he wrote and quoted from his works, and although the fruits of his appreciation

are not abundant, they include reviews and papers on Shakespearean actors and critics. Also, Shakespearean references are scattered throughout his writings, which lends authenticity to his criticism. By his own admission, he says that he likes to write 'in fits and starts';¹² his contributions are not sound scholarship, only impressions with no interest in the problem of dates or of scholarship, dramatic construction and text; the plots are dismissed as needing no further consideration, they are 'perfect' in their own right. Later, as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, he used Shakespearean characters as illustrations of differing human emotions in his lectures on moral philosophy. Mrs. Gordon, in the Memoir of John Wilson, quotes a description of a lecture observed and recorded by the medallist of the session 1850-1851,

We had the beautiful pictures of filial affection, drawn by Sophocles and Shakespeare respectively in *Antigone* and *Cordelia*, extemporaneously, but most effectively and splendidly described... We had then parental affection copiously illustrated in a series of lectures ... One whole lecture was devoted to Shakespeare's character of Constance, as exhibiting the workings of maternal affection ... The paternal affections and friendship were next dealt with in the same interesting manner, with illustrative references to the writings of Jeremy Taylor, Lord Bacon, Cicero, Shakespeare, Dugald Stewart, Thomson and Coleridge.¹³

Robert Patterson, in an article in the Dublin University Magazine for May 1854, notes how Wilson constantly vivified his lectures by references to the dramatist;

Who does not remember his splendid critiques on Shakespeare's plays, as illustrative of the operation of the passions; or fail to recall the happy phrase in which he characterised the last action of *Desdemona* as 'a *holy lie*'?¹⁴

There is little bibliographical reference to Shakespeare in periodical criticism. In *BM Wilson* described him as 'a Poet, Philosopher, and a supereminent Playwright'.¹⁵ He quoted the tradition that Shakespeare in his youth was a deer-stealer in the parks of Warwickshire, and a linkboy in the London streets. Also, that he died 'before his grand climacteric in a dimmish sort of a middle-sized tenement in Stratford-on-Avon, of a surfeit

from an overdose of home-brewed humming ale.¹⁶ He was a national poet, a product of England, 'a great, powerful, rich, highly-civilized country --- She has produced from her celestial seed-unequalled names - Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Newton, Bacon, and other giants who scale heaven not to storm it, but to worship and adore.'¹⁷ Wilson does not describe him as an actor, but as he regarded Shakespeare's intellectual destiny to be the greatest of dramatists, he notes that his trade of acting had helped him to know his audience and about the nature of the theatre. His plays were intended for acting, and the stage opened out for him as the plays evolved. Why he was a dramatic poet was because of his poetic constitution, and the age in which he lived; his knowledge of human nature and deep passions; his universal sympathies and imaginative insight. He had a soul that was 'like Intellect, descending into the world, and putting on human life, faculties, and sense, whereby to know the world.'¹⁸ He saw all things in their beauty and power, and in their true relation to man, and to each other; but he was not shaken by them, like men. As Wilson observed,

He sees beauty in external nature, - in men's souls, - in children, - in Ariel, - in Imogen, - in thought, - in fancy, - in feeling, - in passion, - in moral being, - in melody, - not in one thing; but wherever it is, he has the discernment of it.¹⁹

It showed his depth and energy of thought. His plays and poems show he had a keen sense of beauty, and an ear for tone and rhythm. This capacity for sense experience, and an 'eye and ear' for nature, was invaluable for a poet; but his power to draw characters and move the passions drew him to drama.

To Wilson a play was 'an imitation of life in as far as the actions and events and passions of a few hours can represent that of a whole life time'²⁰ and 'the representation of nature'.²¹ In his survey of German, French, Spanish, and English drama, only the English drama was action and 'it was a species of poetry distinguished for the fulness and the decision with which the springs of action in the human bosom are shown as breaking forth into, and determining, human action'.²² It 'aspires to give representations of Human Life in all its infinite varieties, and inconsistencies, and conflicts and turmoils produced by the Passions.'²³ It reflected his own passion for life, and interest in human nature, and

knowledge of human experience. It was 'a sublime conception'²⁴ and had only been crowned with full success in Shakespeare. Wilson had already shown his enthusiasm for the Elizabethan era in his essays on Elizabethan dramatists, where he pointed out their mastery of passions and richness of language. Shakespeare comprised the whole of English drama, and had absorbed what other dramatists had attempted. 'The model, or law, or self of the English drama is Shakespeare'²⁵ in Wilson's judgement. Not one of the contemporary dramatists had produced a Great Tragedy. Later, he replaced Shakespeare by Milton, '...In the English language there is but one Great Poem. What! Not "Lear," "Hamlet," "Othello," "Macbeth?" - "PARADISE LOST."²⁶

The character of the drama was the picturing of nature. There were certain features that Wilson admired in relation to this principle; in the first place, the singular variety of its subjects, from all conditions and persons of society, from the varieties of the human heart within and beyond life in imagination, so that this drama, more than any other, is the mirror of man's existence. It restores what has passed, in the 'intimate mastery of passion.'²⁷ In the second place, its rejection of the unities; 'And what cares the Mind about Time and Place? Not one brass farthing,'²⁸ Wilson exclaims. Admittedly, the unities have one advantage; they are death to weak dramatists. 'Claims such as they (the unities) impose, strong genius alone can bear.'²⁹ In the third place, the careless, unconcerted structure of its plots, which follow the pattern of real life. In the fourth place, the plenitude of vigorous and real existence, even to extreme individuality of character in the agents; and, in the fifth place, the intermixture of tragedy and comedy. The creative imagination, characterisation and the passions were the topics that preoccupied the 'Romantic' reading of Shakespeare.

Wilson's most general treatment of Shakespeare appears in his review on Campbell's poetry. He praises the universal and generic quality of Shakespeare's mind-'boundless in intellect and in sympathy,'³⁰ describing him as unequalled in the universality of his genius. His literary supremacy was assured. 'What mortal man, in universality of genius, ever equalled Shakespeare', asks Wilson.³¹ He was a 'divine Bard',³² and 'in him, far and high beyond all other manifestation, shone in dramatic form the Genius of the Soul'.³³ His mind

was unlike the action of Wilson's own mind, and its power of communication: 'how deep and unboundedly various his beholding of men's minds, and of all manifested existence, - how wonderful his celerity of thought, the dartings of his intellect, like the lightning-glimpse, to all parts of his whole range of known being'³⁴. It was difficult, therefore, to know whether we had attained the purposes of his mind. He, above all poets, looked upon men, and lived for mankind. As Wilson remarked, 'Whatever in nature and life was given to man, was given in contemplation and poetry to him also, and over the undimmed mirror of his mind passed all the shadows of our mortal world.'³⁵ This was the source of his poetic power; he described the whole of human experience: 'All passions-all emotions-all affections-all sentiments-all opinions-all fears-all hopes-all desires-whatever constitutes the heart, the soul, and the mind - were the subject matter of Shakespeare's plays.'³⁶ His dramas never appeared merely like works of Fiction; each appeared 'like a portion of the real history of Mankind, only with Poetry cast over it.'³⁷

Shakespeare's ability to identify completely with his own creations, led to stress on the importance of the power of sympathy and literary critics included it in their analysis of genius and the poetical character. Beattie summarised this attitude in 1778, when he remarked that 'the philosophy of Sympathy ought always to form a part of the science of Criticism.'³⁸ In BM (April 1845) appeared an article, possibly by Wilson which observed:

To move the heart, whether by painting, poetry or eloquence, requires the same mind. The means by which the effect is to be produced are not different. The one works, indeed, with the pencil the other with the pen; the one composes in verse, the other in prose - but what then? These are the means to the end, they are not the end itself. There are many avenues to the human heart, but the inner doors in them all are to be opened only by one key, and that key is never denied to the suit of genius.³⁹

Sympathy is linked with Wilson's idea of genius, '---Genius does not work on a consideration of the supply in the market, of the stock in hand. In whatever way it has power to bring itself into sympathy with the heart of the people, so as to dwell in their love and

delight, it will go to its work in obedience to such impulses;--⁴⁰ Like other romantic ideas, it can be traced back to the eighteenth century, at least to the theory of sympathy, or the moral sentiment, in Hume and Adam Smith. The idea of sympathy and imagination was strongly linked and Shakespeare represented the ideal because his language represented a model for speech based on sympathetic imagination.

In his poems, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, and his Sonnets, Shakespeare had shown characteristics of original poetic genius. He was above all men learned, in the sense that he had learned from the most important book of all, the book of Life. He had read in the English language as much as he wished of wit and wisdom, and therefore he had 'inherited the mind of the world'.⁴¹ The importance was his humanity. Aspects of original poetic genius were musical versification, together with the power over words, and Shakespeare wrote with spirit. Of all writers, Wilson considered the poet is the most exquisite in his words: 'His creations revolve in them-live in them-breathe and burn'.⁴² Shakespeare had expressed this -

"the poet's *pen* turns them to shape." Ariel, and Lear, and Hamlet, are not except in the very words - their very own words. For the poet, of all men, feels most -
susceptibly, sensitively, perceptively, acutely, accurately, clearly, tenderly, kindly, -
the contact of his mind with yours; and the words are the *medium of contact*!"⁴³

It showed the importance of the soliloquy in drama for revealing the inner mood and action of the character. The musical forms of his language are, first, prose; second, loose blank verse; third, tied blank verse; fourth, rhyme. Wilson notes the varieties of music and that speakers of all orders and characters use all the forms.

Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Coriolanus, Lance, use prose; Leontes and his little boy, Lear, Coriolanus, and his domestics - to say nothing of the Steward - Macbeth and his murderlings, use blank verse. Even Falstaff, now and then, a verse. All, high and low, wise, merry, and sad, rhyme. Fools, witches, fairies - we know not who else - use lyrical measures. Upon the whole the *utmost* - that is, the musical form - answers herein to the *innermost* spirit. The spirit, endlessly-varying, creates

endlessly varying musical form. The total character is accordingly self-lawed, irrepressible creation.⁴⁴

Wilson concluded that blank verse was the predominating musical form of Shakespeare's comedies, histories, and tragedies. It was the rule and all other forms are 'diverse exceptions. Only one comedy, the homely and English "Merry Wives of Windsor," has, for its rule, prose⁴⁵. Shakespeare and Milton were the masters of blank verse 'two great barbarous kings with a numerous court'⁴⁶, although it had been used earlier by dramatists such as Fletcher and Marlowe, and the reason why blank verse was the preferred musical form of Shakespeare's Dramas was: 'Because it has a *middle removedness* or *estrangement* from the ordinary speech of men; - raising the language into imagination, and yet not out of sympathy'.⁴⁷

Shakespeare was the writer in whom Wilson considered the highest art of writing, the art of simplicity, reaches its height. He defined it as 'that magical art of steeping the words and idioms that fall from the lip at every minute, in music, and beauty, and pathos, and power, so that the familiar sound slips along the well-known inlets in the soul, and we are -"took ere we are 'ware."⁴⁸ The truth was 'that the intenser working of the mind finds out, in every age, the perpetuities of a language.' If there was a 'wildness' and an 'irregularity' in his style, it was because he wrote for the stage and occasionally gave into it. His bad jokes and puns were subservient to his age, and in this he yielded from his nature, although he was above it in spirit, like Milton.

A second mark of poetic genius was characterisation. Wilson responds enthusiastically to Shakespeare's 'piercing and various inquisition of humanity for which he was gifted'⁴⁹ in which the persons and action are invested. Whatever passed through their minds passed through his, so that it is a mirror of reality. He pays tribute to the conception of characters, they were all 'perfect models, perfect images of all human characters and of all human events.'⁵⁰ It was impossible to remove any defect from his great characters, or add to their perfect composition. They were individual and real men and women, like Chaucer's conception of character. Shakespeare was 'the Promethean maker of men and women'⁵¹. As Wilson notes, we build up carefully our conception of character, but Shakespeare did not. He

found springs of being in his man, and he unlocked them. The pageants that move before us on the stage are mere strangers, and it is Shakespeare alone who can give to fleeting phantoms the definite interest of real personages. This was his glorious power, but one must not expect the same truth of character as in real life. Wilson asks 'Which of all the manifold beings he has drawn, lives before our thoughts, our eyes, in most unpictured reality? Is it Othello, Shylock, Falstaff, Lear, the Wife of Macbeth, Imogen, Hamlet, Ariel?'⁵²

The power in Shakespeare of creation, whether by inspiration, as from some divine force flowing through him, or by original genius, meant Shakespeare was the poet of Nature, which Pope said was "At once the source, and end, and test of art"⁵³. Wilson does not distinguish between Art and Nature, noting that, except in Shakespeare, 'we look in vain for the entire fulness, the self-consistency, and self-completeness of perfect art'⁵⁴. He comments,

Of Shakespeare and Homer alone it may be averred that we miss in them nothing of the greatness of nature. In all other poets we do; we feel the measure of their power and the restraint under which it is held; but in Shakespeare and Homer, all is free and unbounded as in nature; and as we travel along with them, in a car drawn by celestial steeds, our view seems ever interminable as before, and still equally far off the glorious horizon.⁵⁵

Wilson's insistence that Shakespeare could not be judged by Aristotle's rules, pointing out the organic unity of the plays, and their evolvment from within, made it clear that, unlike his predecessors, Wilson did not find Shakespeare deficient in his Art.

In his Specimens of British Critics, Wilson notes that Pope had drawn attention to the principle of contrast, and he quotes as examples Macbeth and Richard III, both murderous usurpers, and as different as two men can be; of Lenotes and Othello, two jealous husbands, and equally different in their jealousy; of Coriolanus and Hotspur, the semi-traditionary Roman patrician and the historical English earl's son, twinned by so many profound affinities, yet never evoking comparison in the reader's mind; Hamlet and the melancholy Jacques, both shrewd observers of men, both given to philosophising, and yet so

different. Wilson notes that basically Shakespeare had an aristocratic conception of character, and he criticises Pope's comment that Shakespeare 'lays his scene among tradesmen and mechanics'⁵⁶, and his apology for the "very middling sort of company"⁵⁷ which Shakespeare obliges us to keep, by the obligation he was under of 'holding the mirror up to' his hearers, who, being for the most part, "the meaner sort of people"⁵⁸, would only recognise and sympathise with images drawn from life. As Wilson commented, 'the truth is that the comedy of Shakespeare... loves to tread on floors of state, and it associates familiarly with the highly-born and highly-natured.'⁵⁹ The 'vulgar associations'⁶⁰ and experience of the spectators are distanced by the Roll of Manners, and of the thirteen comedies lying in Italy, Illyria, Germany, Greece, France, Asia Minor, Sicily, Bohemia, only one, 'The Merry Wives of Windsor', was situated in England. It was the one that most possessed the understandings of an English, a London, audience, in the reign of Elizabeth, and its manners were those of English life. Wilson also admires Shakespeare's heroines, and his reverence for women, noting that all his female characters were idealised and purified.

Shakespeare's presentation of passion is similarly changing and fluctuating. Wilson defined the passions as,

The art and act of suffering. What is Imagination? The art and act of creating. The two together? Poetry, dealing with mortal pleasure and pain, and thereby subliming even while it saddens, beautifying even while it troubles life and death.⁶¹

Earlier, Wilson had spoken of the power of the passions in his Recreations, and considered that Love is the foundation of passion. By passion, he did not mean only dark strong emotions, but also the brighter and weaker passions, ' - yet say not *weaker* for they are strong as death; - Love and Pity, Awe and Reverence, Joy, Grief, and sorrow, sunny smiles and showery tears...'⁶². Shakespeare seemed to capture all these in 'his delineations of human passion'⁶³.

Shakespeare's ability to describe a passion and get inside it, through his sympathetic imagination, was his greatest power. To Wilson poetry was the language of passion, and the

poet had the ability to move people by the power of words. The range of Shakespeare's imagination is no less varied and mobile than his conception of character and passion. As Shakespeare noted, in the character of Puck, 'It had put a girdle round the world in forty minutes'.⁶⁴ Wilson calls his imagination 'the boarded stage'⁶⁵, meaning the theatre of the mind. It was a faculty, and, possessed by the Greeks, was one which made their priests into heroes. It especially liked aristocratic personages for various reasons. The idea of sympathetic imagination applied to the audience, and it was their emotional response, whether of joy or terror, that awakened recognition and engaged them in his plays.

Wilson analyses the plays through the sympathetic imagination. Tragedy is his favourite genre, as it showed the darker side of human existence. Tragedies showed the inner man, and were all revelations, dealing with the problem of evil. Wilson noted the elements that he felt were essential for the composition of a tragedy: a powerful intellect, a vivid imagination, and a keen insight into human nature, particularly the passions. In the present day, there were no deep passions portrayed, but the genre linking life with the passions would be Tragedy. He regretted there was no dramatic tragedy in the present climate; only Byron and Coleridge had written tragedies that were comparable with earlier tragic drama.

The purpose of tragedy was moral. It dealt with effect, which was the power of all good poetry. In tragedy the emotions of pity and terror were involved, and in poetry those of pleasure. Tragedy deals with character, and not the external world, as vehicles of passion. The conflict of passion is seen by the display of their own passions. Wilson asks:

What, pray, is the aim of all tragedy? The Stagyrte has told us - to purify the passions by pity and terror. They ventilate and cleanse the soul - till its atmosphere is like that of a calm, bright summer day. All plays, therefore, must be on the passions.⁶⁶

The romantic view of tragedy was dominated by speculations about destiny, chance, free will, and suffering caused by human wickedness. It contained elements of the Greek idea, regarding a great person with a fatal flaw. As Wilson noted, 'A tragedy is a leaf torn from

the Book of Fate⁶⁷, and he compares the two types of tragedy, Greek and English in the Noctes No. Forty Eight April 1830:

North. The Greek Tragedy, James, was austere in its principles, as the Greek Sculpture. Its subjects were all of ancestral and religious consecration; its style, high, and heroic, and divine, admitted no intermixture even of mirth, or seldom and reluctantly, - much less of grotesque and fantastic extravagances of humour, which would have marred the consummate dignity, beauty, and magnificence of all the scenes that swept along that enchanted floor. Such was the spirit that shone on the soft and the stately Sophocles. But Shakespeare came from heaven - and along with him a Tragedy that poured into one cup the tears of mirth and madness; shewed Kings one day crowned with jewelled diadems, and another day with wild wisps of straw; taught the Prince who, in single combat,

"Had quench'd the flame of hot rebellion

Even in the rebels' blood,"

to moralize on the field of battle over the carcass of a fat buffoon wittily simulating death among the bloody corpses of English nobles; nay, shewed the son - and that son, prince, philosopher, paragon of men - jocularly conjuring to rest his Father's Ghost, who has revisited earth "by the glimpses of the moon making night hideous."

Shepherd. Stop - stop - sir. That's aneuch to prove your pint.⁶⁸

In Wilson's judgement, there was not one of Shakespeare's works that did not bear marks of his unequalled hand, yet they all seemed to his readers to be marked by different degrees of excellence, and a few seemed distinguished above all the rest. The four that would be recognised as his 'master-works'⁶⁹ by philosophical criticism are the later tragedies of Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, and King Lear. He explains what interests him in each play, showing attention to one ruling passion, but he notes, 'such a passion is not the essence of character. It is a single part of it, that has grown to unnatural strength; and it would be much

more true to say that by such a passion the character is disguised, than elucidated.⁷⁰

Macbeth is chosen by Wilson because it is the most perfect of the plays in tragic action; it is a striking example of the rise and fall of ambition, and this passion is portrayed through the character of Macbeth. It is also an example of Shakespeare's poetic power and has a vein of imagination running through it. Othello is discussed in terms of the 'dreadful overmastering passion of jealousy'⁷¹. The moral dimension is introduced with the conflict of good and evil forces. Hamlet is believed to be the most perfect in unity of character delineation; and King Lear, the most perfect in pathos. Othello, Wilson considers, is perhaps the most greatly drawn, the most heroic of any of Shakespeare's heroes, and is possibly the one really understood least by a reader. Hamlet, he claims, 'alone of all his offspring, has Shakespeare's own intellect'⁷². The ending of King Lear, he maintains, shows the tragedy of life itself; it is to the enlightened reader 'high and calm, illustrative of the Eternal Truth, that evil must not be, and that good must be'⁷³. Shakespeare had shown elements of the Greek conception, all are great men and kings, all have a fatal flaw and weakness, and all perish.

Wilson considers the order in which Shakespeare wrote the Tragedies, noting that Macbeth as 'the first of these has the most entire tragic action of any of his plays'.⁷⁴ It shows tragic unity, the centralising of ambition. His earliest criticism was found in the paper for February 1818, and culminated in an essay entitled Cruikshank on Time, ending with final references in three articles in the Dies Boreales of 1845-50. Most of what Wilson has to say is concerned with the supernatural, the ghosts and the witches, but there are also his comments on his 'astounding *Discoveries*'⁷⁵ of double time and the human interest of the rise and fall of ambition.

Macbeth is outwardly a story of crime and punishment, but what most interests Shakespeare is the inner tragedy and state of mind of the central figure. The central interest is one which has always had a strong influence over human sympathy, the rise and fall of ambition. As Wilson noted, 'Men look on the darings of this passion with strong sympathy because it is one of the strongest inherent feelings in human nature - the aspiring of the mind through its consciousness of power, shown in the highest form of human life.'⁷⁶ He remarked, 'The human interest of the play is the acting of the purpose of ambition, and the

fate which attends it - the high capacities of blinded desire in the soul - and the moral retribution which overrules the affairs of men.⁷⁷

Macbeth is a tragic hero who displays 'naked villainy'⁷⁸, and contains the seeds of his downfall within himself. Wilson points out his poetical character, and the struggle within his mind.

The mightiest of temptations occurs to a mind, full of power, endowed with available moral elements, but without set virtue - without principles - "and down goes all before it." If the essential delineation of Macbeth be this conflict of Moral elements - of good and evil - of light and darkness - I see a very poetical conception; if merely a hardened and bloody hypocrite from the beginning, I see none.⁷⁹

Macbeth possesses Moral intuition and Moral Intelligence, and has an almost morbid impressibility of imagination revealed in his mental movements. He really sees a dagger before him. His poetical and imaginative mind is revealed in the first soliloquy, and some of his language is deliberately extravagant to impress on the audience the imaginative side of his nature. Wilson remarked that Macbeth had 'sublime flashes of magnanimity, courage, tenderness, and which continually burst forth in the manly but ineffective struggle of every exalted quality that can dignify and adorn the human mind, first against the allurements of ambition, and afterwards against the pangs of remorse and horrors of despair.'⁸⁰ The strongest expression of his character was that he was not 'self-stayed'⁸¹, and in heart he was a murderer before he saw the witches. He throws himself upon 'the illicit divinings of futurity'⁸² and we see with what 'subjugating sway'⁸³ the three spirits take over. Lady Macbeth, on the contrary, is 'self-stayed'⁸⁴, and this difference marks the poetical opposition of two people. Wilson compares Macbeth with Richard III, whom he describes as 'a bold, heroic hypocrite. He knows he is one. He lies to Man - never to his own Conscience or to Heaven.'⁸⁵

The poetical interest is the intermingling of the supernatural agency with the transactions of life. The evil in Macbeth is stirred into active life by the witches; they are 'the Fascination of Contact between Passion and Opportunity'⁸⁶, and show that there are powers

in Nature, powers not of ourselves, that make for wickedness. Wilson speaks of the suddenness with which Macbeth decides on the murder. After his submission the audience have to feel that Macbeth is now in the witches' control, and acts with them. He hurries on from one murder to another, driven by his fate.

Macbeth vacillates between good and evil, but Lady Macbeth does not. Although Shakespeare 'loved to put in the lips of women beautiful expressions of love'⁸⁷, he did not intend us to be deceived thereby in our moral judgements. Wilson describes Lady Macbeth as 'a bold, bad woman, - not a Fiend'⁸⁸. He remarks on the 'exceedingly poetical treatment'⁸⁹ used in the showing of Lady Macbeth, noting that she does not take a step on the stage that does not thrill the theatre. Not a word, gesture, or look is wasted; all combine to show 'the studied fulness of sublime tragical power - yet all wonderfully tempered and governed.'⁹⁰ In the Noctes No. Thirty Two: April 1827, the Shepherd describes the acting of Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth.

North ... Sarah was a glorious creature. Methinks I see her now in the sleep-walking scene!

Shepherd. As Leddy Macbeth! Her gran' high straicht-nosed face, whiter than ashes! Fixed een, no like the een o' the dead, yet hardly mair like them o' the leevin'; dim, and yet licht wi' an obscure lustre through which the tormented sowl looked in the chains o' sleep and dreams wi' a' the distraction o' remorse and despair, - and oh! sic an expanse o' forehead for world o' dreadfu' thochts, aneath the braided blackness o' her hair, that had nevertheless been put up wi' a steady and nae uncarefu' haun' before the troubled Leddy had lain doon, for it behoved ane so high-born as she, in the middle o' her ruefu' trouble, no to neglect what she owed to her stately beauty, and to the head that lay on the couch of ane o' Scotland's Thanes - noo, likewise about to be, during the short space o' the passing o' a thunder-cloud, her bluidy and usurping King. -----Onwards she used to come - no Sarah Siddons - but just Leddy Macbeth hersel' - though through that melancholy masquerade o' passion, the spectator aye had a confused

glimmerin' apprehension o' the great actress - glidin' wi' the ghostlike motion o' nicht-wanderin' unrest, unconscious o' surroundin' objects, - for oh! how could the glazed, yet gleamin' een, see aught in this material world? - yet, by some mysterious power o' instinct, never touchin' ane o' the impediments that the furniture o' the auld castle micht hae opposed to her haunted footsteps, - on she came, wring, wringin' her hauns, as if washin' them in the cleansin' dewes frae the blouts o' blood, - but wae's me for the murther, out they wad not be, ony mair than the stains on the spat o' the floor where some midnight-slain Christian has groaned out his sould aneath the dagger's stroke, when the sleepin' hoose heard not the shriek o' departing life.-----Whether a' this, sirs, was natural or not, ye see I dinna ken, because I never beheld ony woman, either gentle or semple, walkin' in her sleep after having committed murder. But Lord safe us! that hollow, broken-hearted voice, "out, damned spot," was o' itsell aneugh to tell to a' that heard it, that crimes done in the flesh during time will needs be punished in the spirit during eternity. It was a dradfu' homily yon, sirs; and wha that saw would ever ask whether tragedy or the stage was moral, purging the soul, as she did, wi' pity and wi' terror?⁹¹

The impression is that Lady Macbeth dies of pure remorse, having known of only one murder - Duncan's - of all the murders Macbeth may have committed. The Magic of the tragedy is sustained by the audience's belief in the love between Macbeth and his wife, and it is this union, defined for the purposes of evil, instead of the customary good, that tempers the Murder Tragedy by its negation of moral values.

Macbeth is a tragic hero, whose greatness is allied to a weakness that endangered him. His ambition is the weak side of his poetical nature, his fatal flaw, which brings on a conflict of feeling that ultimately destroys him, the self-destructiveness of evil. The play demonstrates the importance of stage effects, and the opening of the first scene. Wilson drew attention to what he called 'the highest poetical Canon', - "the audience *must understand, and at once*, what that which they see and hear means" - "that Rule must govern the art of

the drama in the Manager's practice."⁹² He continued, 'The First Soliloquy *must* speak the nature of Macbeth else the Craftsman has no skill in his trade. A soliloquy *reveals* that is its function.'⁹³ It reveals the soul discoursing with itself, and if this impression is held in the mind's eye until the first appearance of Lady Macbeth, then this Soliloquy is distinctly the highest point of the Tragedy - the 'tragic acme - or dome - or pinnacle therefore of power indefinite infinite.'⁹⁴ Wilson admired the language of the play, considering it to be more purely tragic than that of any other of Shakespeare's plays - 'it is simple, chaste, and strong - rarely breaking out into fanciful expression, but a vein of imagination always running through.'⁹⁵ But it was the atmosphere of the play, the darkness, the music, and the presence of the witches, that produced a feeling of terror and pity, and especially drew Wilson as a critic. He comments, 'Perhaps something may be owing to national remembrance and association; but we have observed, that in Scotland at least, Macbeth produces a deeper, a more breathless, and a more perturbing passion in the audience than any other drama.'⁹⁶

From the most perfect of the plays in tragic action, Wilson turns to Othello, which is the most perfect in tragic passion. His criticism is contained in the earliest paper on Shakespeare, February, 1818, and later in the Dies Boreales for April 1850. He concentrates on the 'dreadful overmastering passion'⁹⁷ of jealousy; the question of Othello's colour; and the discussion of double time as it was applied to Othello.

The whole interest of the play is contained in the person of Othello, 'the whole destiny of those who are to perish lies in his passion'.⁹⁸ This indicates 'the high tragic character of the play, showing one false illusory passion ruling and confounding all life'⁹⁹. Wilson defines jealousy and envy as 'two delusive passions'¹⁰⁰, and admits he has personally experienced this emotion as he records in the Noctes, '----But I have felt *the* jealousy -- and of all passions it alone springs from seed wafted into the human heart from the Upas Tree of Hell.'¹⁰¹ Similarly, he notes, 'Jealousy - 'Tis the meanest and the basest of all passions - when carelessly it inflames a narrow and a shallow heart. Invading a large heart, 'tis like a grim army of demons - terrible.'¹⁰²

In the Noctes of April 1829, Wilson ridicules Shakespeare's treatment of jealousy, and, at the same time, contends that Iago's character is incomprehensible, it is 'a riddle - of which Shakespeare has not given the solution. Now, all human nature is full of riddles; but it is the business of dramatic poets to solve them - and this one Shakespeare has left unsolved. But having himself proposed it, he was bound either to have solved it, or to have set such a riddle as the wit of man could have solved in two centuries.'¹⁰³ He noted that 'Shakespeare has but feebly painted that passion in Othello. A complete failure. -- But, in the first place, Shakespeare ought to have been above taking an anomalous case of jealousy. How could a black husband escape being jealous of a white wife? There was a cause of jealousy given in his very fate'¹⁰⁴ Wilson disagrees with Coleridge's 'motiveless malignity',¹⁰⁵ commenting that, though Iago's hate is unfathomable, he is moved by professional, and sexual, as well as by radical jealousy. This is amplified by appropriate quotations in the Dies Boreales; first, professionally:

Talboys. He hated Othello for not promoting him but Cassio. That seems to be the real, tangible motive - a haunting, goading, fretting preference - an affront - an insult - a curbing of power - wounding him where alone he is sensitive in self-esteem and pride.¹⁰⁶

Secondly, on sexual grounds:

Talboys. Iago was jealous of Othello. He says he was, and either believes it, or tries to believe it. His own words intimate the doubt, and the determination to believe. Malignity and hate indulge in giving acceptance to slight grounds --¹⁰⁷

Thirdly, on racial grounds:

Talboys. How is Iago affected by the blackness? No doubt, with more hate and aversion as being commanded by and outshone by him ¹⁰⁸

The long discussion of Othello's colour is fully quoted in the New Variorum Edition, in which Wilson calls the Moor 'a specimen of the Ethical Marvellous: two natures conjoined - the moral Caucasian White, and the animal tropical Black.'¹⁰⁹ Later, he burst out enthusiastically, with the exclamation that Othello is to him a perfect character, 'He is a

tropical animal - kindred to the lion - the tiger - the dragon - and, on the other hand, he has the rational equipoise of the faculties that stamp the Philosopher - and he is everything between the two.¹¹⁰ Wilson notes that Iago grossly calls Othello 'a black ram',¹¹¹ Brabantio speaks, with disgust, of his 'sooty bosom';¹¹² Mine Ancient, in Cyprus, of the 'Black Othello'¹¹³. Like Polonius, he was a figure mis-represented on the stage, in Wilson's judgement.

The character of Othello is contrasted to that of Iago. Wilson describes him as 'the finest man of his time - the Captain of the Venetian Six-Foot Club'¹¹⁴. He was the most eloquent of his age, the bravest, most victorious, and descended from a kingly line. He was a modest man, but had within him the germs of fear, and doubt, and jealousy, that 'dark fierce flood of boiling passion, polluting even his imagination'¹¹⁵. His credulity, his 'frank generous magnanimity'¹¹⁶ and 'his tenderness of affection'¹¹⁷ is the weak side of his free and open nature. The movement of the passion in Othello is different from that of Macbeth. In Macbeth the struggle of ambition and conscience is contained throughout the play, from first to last; in Othello the conflict between contrary passions continues for only a short time, and the chief interest is the changing power of disordered love, from happiness, to jealousy, and hatred. He was 'a mighty being struck with death, and bringing up from all the depths of life convulsions and agonies.'¹¹⁸ His happy love was heroic tenderness, but his injured love is terrible passion, and Wilson observed that 'disordered power engendered within itself to its own destruction, is the height of all tragedy.'¹¹⁹

The number of April and May 1850 of the Dies Boreales develop Wilson's 'astounding Discoveries'¹²⁰ of long time and short time as applied to Othello, and first introduced in Macbeth. A.L. Strout says this is 'his greatest contribution to Shakespearean criticism'¹²¹. M.C. Ridley, editor of the Arden edition of Othello, notes that the time theory, or double time scheme, is discussed in 'three brilliant articles in BM'¹²², and that it is not 'an idle waste of time'¹²³. It is also described by A.C. Bradley in Shakespearean Tragedy, 1904, in several papers of the 'Duration of the Action in Othello', where he comments, 'Christopher North, who dealt very fully with the question, elaborated a doctrine of Double Time, Short

and Long.¹²⁴ Also, H. Furness, editor of the New Variorum edition of Othello refers to the phenomenon.

N.J. Halpin writes of Shakespeare's treatment of time, pointing out that he has a double series of time or dates - the illusory and the real, the protractive and the accelerating. Wilson pursues the same theme, but more finely, relating it to deeper needs. In his reference to his 'astounding discoveries'¹²⁵ in Macbeth, he drew attention to the problem, and earlier references in BM noted Shakespeare's preoccupation with the influence of time. Wilson himself felt there was a metaphysical time and a physical time, and as mind is always superior to matter, he regarded the former as more significant while acknowledging the difficulty of the stage setting. The gain of the alteration of time on the stage is justified, partly due to the peculiarities of tragic construction which followed laws of genius rather than art. Shakespeare used the licence of his imaginative resources; he 'mixes times of the world, and we bear it'¹²⁶ because it is part of imagination and we accept it. He comments that Hamlet, born and bred in the court of Elizabeth, is shown, 'to our credulous apprehension, rooted upon a soil and in a century when and where there were no human shapes to be met with but bloodthirsty Vikings and invulnerable Berserkers.'¹²⁷ The gain is worth the 'slight intellectual concession'¹²⁸, and 'we have been set down, not after the saying of Horace, now in Greece and now in Britain - but in Britain and in Greece at one and the same moment.'¹²⁹

Shakespeare had shown that he was aware of the usual time of stage duration for a play's performance:

Those that come to see
Only a show or two, and so agree
The play may pass, if they be still and willing,
I'll undertake may see away their shilling
Richly in two short hours.

Henry VIII (Prologue)

Further, Shakespeare has shown that he was aware of the classical laws of unity of time by his plays of The Tempest and The Comedy of Errors, in both of which the correct

time is observed. Milton, in his Introductory Essay to Samson Agonistes, had indicated the length of dramatic time in a play, noting that, "The circumscription of time, wherein the whole drama begins and ends, is, according to ancient rule and best example, within the space of twenty four hours."¹³⁰ This was observed with great accuracy and indicated as The Tempest proceeds,

Now, farewell, till half an hour hence.

The Tempest, III, i

Basically, Wilson felt Shakespeare treated time unconsciously, using two clocks which he called 'Short Time' and 'Long Time'¹³¹. Action follows the hourly clock (the 'short time'), while Shakespeare takes the longer one ('long time') for granted. The audience, therefore, appear to see things which have not really happened, as the effect is of events happening spontaneously which in reality are not taking place. It is a trick, but the audience is aware of this and accepts it as part of imagination.

Shakespeare adapts a story that demands scope to describe its incidents, develop characters, and depict different emotions. It is possible to see a long course of time, or a limited time (compressed, or short time), or a simultaneous progress of long time and current time together, without a distortion or violation of the overall natural effect of the play.

In Othello, where passion demanded prompt action and rapidity of movement, the spectator is only given a few hours between the first concept of wrong and the fulfilment of revenge. Also where the impression of long-standing happiness, undermined by insidious implications, demanded protracted time, he allows the spectator to imagine that several days, weeks, and months have elapsed between the arrival of the married couple of Othello and Desdemona in Cyprus and the ultimate murder of Desdemona by her husband. Othello was Governor of Cyprus for two days - but long time is cunningly insinuated. Iago has wooed Emilia to steal the handkerchief a hundred times. Emilia's willingness to die for Desdemona suggests time, as love, trust, and loyalty had to be created in her, over a period of time. This last touch shows the unity of Shakespeare, and goes deep into his soul, suggesting the power of love over evil.

Wilson concedes that stage time is very different from ordinary time. The means by which Shakespeare managed to establish the two impressions - hurried action and feeling requiring rapid movement, and the effect of brief time; while latitude for passing events equally important produce the sense of long or lengthened time - was indicated either by deliberate mention of particular hours, or casual allusion, or a vaguely worded inference. In each case there was a set purpose and a fulfilment of the intended object. In Othello, an example of Short Time was:

And, sir, tonight,

I do entreat that we may sup together;

You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus.

Othello. iv.1

and of Long Time,

How, how? Let's see:

After some time, to abuse Othello's ear

That he is too familiar with his wife.

Othello. i. 3

Both time scales show that Shakespeare chose to work within his rules irrespective of convention.

Wilson considered that the greatness of the play lies in the long, drawn-out intensity of pathos engendered by the performance; the oneness of action because of the oneness of interest, the villainy of Iago; a perfect symmetry of form with every part or detail of character and plot contributing to a whole. The evil of Desdemona's murder is almost as absolute as Iago's villainy, and Shakespeare shows pain and wrong in their purest form. The play is left open-ended, and there is no poetic justice as in Hamlet and Ophelia, and King Lear and Cordelia, when love is immortalised by death. Othello and Desdemona are two Tragic figures, whose tragic flaw was their weakness and their undoing. It was Desdemona's destiny to be allied with Othello. The absolute evil of Iago is set against virtue, and there is a similar heightening and lowering of characters. Othello as a character shows the strength and

weakness of our nature, and both he and Desdemona suffer for their greatness. The play shows that love in the absolute always involves sacrifice. It is a tragedy of life, rather than love, as Othello's complete trust in the goodness of life, represented by Desdemona, has been undermined and destroyed by evil: 'it is the infirmity of our good nature, wrestling in vain with the strong powers of evil.'¹³²

The article on Hamlet of February 1818 is possibly one of the finest of the early contributions to BM. 'T.C. on Shakespeare doth himself surpass'¹³³, comments the author, probably Lockhart. In a later review, that of March 1833, Wilson specifically states that he wrote the Letters on Shakespeare of February 1818, from which this statement is taken. It was Shakespeare's favourite play, and one with which he identified himself. Wilson described it as 'the most Shakespearean of all Shakespeare's dramas'¹³⁴, and believed that Hamlet's mind was like Shakespeare's, 'He alone, of all his offspring, has Shakespeare's own intellect.'¹³⁵ It is perhaps superior to any other in existence for unity in the delineation of character. As Wilson notes, 'It is the variation of his mind, and not the varying events of his life, that affords the interest.'¹³⁶

Wilson's criticism depended on the principle that no fictitious, and few historical personages, have given rise to such controversy. The character of Hamlet has a universal appeal, 'In him, his character, and his situation, there is a concentration of all the interests that belong to humanity.'¹³⁷ 'We love Hamlet even as we love ourselves',¹³⁸ declares Hazlitt. To Wilson, Hamlet represents 'the brave, the noble-minded, the philosophic'¹³⁹, whose natural temperament is more a thinker than a doer. He describes him as, 'moody, metaphysical, impatient, open-hearted.'¹⁴⁰ -- 'and an habitual dweller with his own thoughts.'¹⁴¹ The errors are caused by the fact that his abstract intellect is an overbalance for his active impulses. He prefers the possible to the real - 'refining on the ideal forms of things, till the things themselves become dim in his sight, and all the common doings and sufferings, the obligations and engagements of the world, a weary task, stale and unprofitable.'¹⁴² When he does act, he acts with great energy and decision. Wilson shares the view of other critics that what his character wanted was will.

The way Wilson deals with three central problems of this tragedy show his critical faculty and his intuitive feeling for the play: Hamlet's relations with Ophelia; his assumption of madness; and the reason for his indecision and delay. First, Hamlet's relation with Ophelia: he says that Hamlet's love for Ophelia was never profound, as evidenced by Hamlet seeing her grave. He regards the scene of Hamlet leaping into the grave as 'merely painful'¹⁴³, and believes it is anger with Laertes that provokes the action. There was nothing in Ophelia to make her the object of passion; she attracted him as a creature of a spiritual nature. His trust in women had been undermined by the frailty of his mother's behaviour. He parted from Ophelia without pain, as love had ceased. Wilson admired Ophelia, 'She is like an artless, gladsome, and spotless shepherdess with the gracefulness of society hanging like a transparent veil over her natural beauty.'¹⁴⁴ He contrasts her with the character of the Queen 'who, fallen as she is, feels the influence of her simple and happy virgin purity'¹⁴⁵ Hamlet knows he has contributed to her catastrophe, but seems indifferent.

Secondly, the problem of the assumption of madness: Hamlet, he argues, suffers neither from moral nor from morbid sensibility, but from an excess of intellect and from shock. He disagrees with a contemporary critic, Richardson, who, in his 'excellent essay'¹⁴⁶, states that 'moral sensibility was the chief characteristic of his mind.'¹⁴⁷ There was no physical symptom of disease, although it was difficult to define insanity, but he gave two examples of clear rationality, once when seen in his mother's closet, and then with the dying words he utters.

Thirdly, the reason for Hamlet's indecision and delay: in principle, Wilson followed the Schlegel-Coleridge theory stated by Hazlitt, 'His ruling passion is to think, not to act'¹⁴⁸, but he believed the supernatural element, the ghost, does have an effect on his mind, and he defends this position against romantic critics who try to undermine the character of Hamlet, '--- Now surely, feebleness of mind, the fragility of a china vase, lack of power and energy, are not the characteristics of Hamlet---'¹⁴⁹. The other quotations are an explication of Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost, 'The depths of Hamlet's heart unclothe at the spectral likeness of his father.-----There is in Hamlet a kind of speculative consideration of his father's character and being-.'¹⁵⁰ After the Ghost had appeared, and spoken of his revenge, and Hamlet felt his

sense of moral obligation, Wilson points out the struggle of his mind to resume its normal course and show its mastery over the 'awful shapes and sounds that have usurped its sovereignty.'¹⁵¹ Wilson compares the action of Hamlet's mind, from this state on, to 'a vast black deep river, the surface whereof is curled and rippled by the passing breezes, and seemingly diverted into a hundred eddies, while the strong under-current, dark and changeless, maintains an unvaried course towards the ocean.'¹⁵²

Wilson spoke of the antipathy that must have existed between Hamlet and Polonius, whose natures are entirely discordant. He felt that the character of Polonius, although far less abstruse and profound than that of Hamlet, had been 'grossly misrepresented'¹⁵³, especially on the stage, where he was portrayed as 'a mere doodle, a drivelling caricature of methodical, prying, garrulous, blear-eyed, avaricious dotage.'¹⁵⁴ To Wilson, he resembled 'an emeritus professor of legerdemain, who continues to repeat his slight-of-hand tricks when gout or palsy has deprived his hands of the quickness necessary to deceive'.¹⁵⁵ He is a formalist in politics, a precisian in courtesy. He was a statesman, a member of the Academy of Compliments, and a master of ceremonies, who had 'dappled in polite literature'.¹⁵⁶ His knowledge of the different types of Drama indicated Shakespeare's own scholarship - Tragedy, Comedy, Pastoral, Pastoral-comical, Historical-pastoral, Tragical-historical, Tragical comical, Historical-pastoral, Scene-undividable, or Poem-unlimited. Wilson concludes, of his character, that 'a cautious wisdom, never supported by high, philosophic principles, has degenerated into circuitous craftiness.'¹⁵⁷

Wilson regarded Hamlet as the one play that contained the deepest insight into human nature, and was the most intellectual of all Shakespeare's plays. It had aspects which appealed even to the 'common'¹⁵⁸ audience of Shakespeare's time. It clearly shows the working of Nemesis or retribution, and its effect reaches the innermost part of the soul and ascends to the highest part of imagination. It contains philosophy and commonsense, has strength and beauty, pathos and humour, wit and wisdom. It is the only play where the central character is the drama itself, and the tragedy is not one of ambition, or jealousy, or revenge, but of life. Birth, marriage, and death, Wilson notes, are eternal themes, and the

tragedy of life is its cruelty, pain, suffering, and evil, interlinked with love, joy, and happiness.

King Lear, Wilson considered to be the 'most pathetic'¹⁵⁹ of Shakespeare's plays, but one which readily evokes a passionate sympathy from all ages, 'young and old, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, virtuous and depraved.'¹⁶⁰ Interest is centred on one character, King Lear, who creates an imaginary world around him, where order and disorder are reversed and chaos is allowed to rule, a situation which was symbolic of the mental confusion suffered by the king. Wilson notes that the play is one which appeals directly to the imagination and not the senses, and he discusses the moral problem of a victim of a ruling passion, in this case Love, who suffers injustice. Love is the foundation of all the passions, and the deepest. Innocence and right, symbolised by the king, are allowed to suffer in this world, but from the suffering comes reconciling love. Wilson disapproved of the ending of the play which showed Shakespeare acting against the natural and moral law; it was morally wrong that King Lear should suffer most from his daughters who were closest to him, and that he should be separated from Cordelia's love. The moral conflict of good and evil was the tragedy of life itself; so often the wicked appeared to flourish and the innocent to suffer. Readers should remember, though, the 'eternal truth that good must be, and evil not be.'¹⁶¹ The neo-classic belief in a moral justice meant that Dr Johnson was so affected by the ending that he was unable to re-read the final scenes until he had revised them as editor, 'I might relate I was many years ago so shocked with Cordelia's death that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as editor.'¹⁶² However, Wilson felt it was equally wrong to alter the play so that there was a happy ending, and Cordelia was allowed to marry Edgar, and he criticised Nathum Tate's 'botchings'¹⁶³ whereby he re-wrote a happy ending to the play to appease popular taste. He cites Charles Lamb, and the German critic, Schlegel, who support Shakespeare's ending. Wilson believed that the mystery of why the good have to suffer in life is beyond understanding; we have to accept it as an act of faith, and to believe that there is a higher justice beyond the grave.

Admiration is again given to the female characters, especially that of Cordelia, whom Wilson considers to be 'one of the principal characters'¹⁶⁴, and one who 'is continually present to our imagination'¹⁶⁵. Although she rarely speaks, Wilson commented of her words, 'how few they are - but in power how mighty!'¹⁶⁶, she does have a profound influence on the play, as a representative of good, and the audience feels pity. He cannot resist a philosophical explanation:

Cordelia is a conqueror. Disease and madness sink before her power. In the spiritual kingdom she is mighty to save. But in the war fought with weapons of clay, the Merciful cannot cope with the Cruel. Hate and Sin triumph over Love and Piety; and Lear, half-restored to his poor wits and wholly to his right affections, and his ministering angel, are prisoners "to these daughters and these sisters" and that ambitious Bastard, their savage paramour.¹⁶⁷

For Wilson, the play has a sublimity which is not surpassed, and both readers and audience feel fear and pity for Lear's sufferings. In the *Noctes*, 1830, the Opium-Eater and North discuss a reading of *King Lear*. North says: 'When I read Lear, all my fleshly nature, in such Sublimity, is smitten down by fear and pain, but my spirit survives, conquering, and indestructible.'¹⁶⁸ He showed that there are two kinds of sublimity, first, one within the sense of beauty, and secondly, the moral sense which has a religious spirit. In the former, the imagination experiences the beauty that Wordsworth, 'the Divine'¹⁶⁹ meant when he said "'Thou pitchest thy tents before him'"¹⁷⁰, and is moved in awe before the infinitude of the universe, and the imagination 'seems most to be withdrawn.'¹⁷¹ In the latter, there is a contraction and a going-out of ourselves, and involves

'a triumph of the Moral sense over some sort of pain ---, the most marked thing in it is the feeling of love towards the object made beautiful by that feeling of love. Love, if ye can, the sublime object which shivers and grinds to dust your earthly powers, and then you overspread Sublimity with Beauty - like a merciful smile breaking suddenly from the face of some dreadful giant.'¹⁷²

Wilson rejects the neo-classical picture of moral justice, insisting that who could not be happy now Cordelia is in Heaven? Cordelia herself obeyed the Greek principle of a tragic flaw, demonstrating absolute obedience in a cruel world, therefore she was a victim and her death was appropriate. There are three main elements, the romantic theme of love, involved with intricacy; the soliloquy as a method for a persona to show folly or madness; the sublimity of grandeur which includes the beauty of art. It shows Shakespeare's favourite device of thesis and antithesis, whether in character, action or thought. Good and evil are apparent throughout the play and the theme is love. As Wilson remarked 'the only thing intolerable was, that Lear should, by the very truth of his daughter's love be separated from her love'¹⁷³. The ethical progress of Lear is shown as a conversion from within, charged by love, "I'll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness",¹⁷⁴ King Lear says to Cordelia, but Wilson says there is no forgiveness asked of Cordelia. The ethical importance of Cordelia is symbolic of absolute love, which is spiritual, incorporated into the love of humanity as it borders into the love of God. As a play, *King Lear* depicts a mental struggle which sets love against the despair and hopelessness of the world.

Like Hazlitt, Wilson's outlook on life was tragic. He believed that nobody could be unaware of the calamities of life who experienced the terror and fear presented in the tragedies, or fail to be moved by them. Only tragedy can evoke the power of imagination. All the tragedies have a common element, the truth of human experience shown by a tragic character or a tragic situation. Each has his flaw, whether it is a passion or an erring will; in Macbeth, it is a tragedy of the individual; in Hamlet, it is of the Human Heart; and in Othello and King Lear, it is one of life itself. Truth is created by the tragic characters confronting a world of pain and death, and penetrating the moral complexities of right and wrong and establishing some kind of order from chaos. The audience, or reader, knows there is a mind behind the play, and according to Hazlitt and Wilson the audience gets its knowledge by collective thought and feeling, and self-identification with the tragic hero. As the hero gains and struggles with evil that overcomes him, the audience extends its mind sublimely to understand man's capability for bearing the unbearable and understands evil. Knowledge

deals with the power of hating evil, and brings an internal order from chaos. It does not release man from pain or suffering, but it can comprehend evil as part of life. The moral problem, which Wilson emphasises, is that life itself is a mixture of good and evil, and the necessity of evil is explained in a future life. The importance of the tragedies is that they must change the spectator's outlook on life, or way of thinking and behaving.

Wilson shows less interest in the comedies, and discusses them in less detail than the tragedies. His principal remarks are contained in his four reviews of Mrs. Jameson's Characteristics of Women, BM, January, February, March and April 1833. He reminds readers that 'Shakespeare rejoiced sometimes to sing in a lowlier and a livelier strain - to shew our common life with its sunniest southern aspect, all teeming with blossoms and fruitage ---. For 'fruitage', say at once, females, --'¹⁷⁵ The comedies include many of his rhapsodical descriptions of female characters: 'We are carried in among his Comedies; and what Beves of Beauty!'¹⁷⁶ He declared that the Winter's Tale and Cymbeline 'are the two most delightful dramas in the whole world. Add to them, As You Like It, The Midsummer Night's Dream, and The Tempest, and you have the 'Planetary Five' whom all eyes may worship.'¹⁷⁷

The article of January contains Wilson's only specific reference to 'the use Shakespeare delighted so powerfully to make of the great principle of contrast.'¹⁷⁸ He illustrates it with the characters of Hermione and Paulina who are sufficiently placed to show all the pleasure of contrast, but are never brought too near in contact on the scene or in the dialogue. Also significant is the sentence: "Tis surely the loveliest pastoral poem in the world, this of Florizel and Perdita".¹⁷⁹ The play suggested finest perceptions of the natural and poetical, and many extracts 'breathe of beauty like the groves in spring'.¹⁸⁰

Wilson's remarks in the February number on Desdemona are flippant,

The "gentle Desdemona", too, like Imogen, wedded without her father's consent or knowledge. So we believe did Juliet, so did Jessica, and so fain would Perdita have done, and mayhap, had Prospero been

unreasonable, even Miranda. Shakespeare is a dangerous author to young ladies who are not orphans----¹⁸¹

and on Cordelia sentimental, and he considers that the character of Iachimo was a dunce, 'The "yellow Iachimo" was even a greater fool than knave---(and clever as he was thought, he was the Prince of Dunces).'¹⁸²

The article of March contains some of Wilson's rhapsodies on various heroines, including a final tribute to Miranda,

Juliet is thrilled to the heart's core by the first kiss of Romeo. Her life is in a moment Passion. --Miranda as suddenly loves; but with her 'tis all imagination - save the sweet impulse of innocent nature, passion there is none. Surprise, wonder, admiration, delight, --in them she finds a new being, and it all gathers upon Ferdinand.¹⁸³

Similarly, in the article of April, Wilson includes many of his remarks on Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It. He described the character of Beatrice as, '--a bright, bold, joyous, being, who lives in the best society; and we do find that she much abuses any but her equals - we may not say her betters, for we find none such in the play.'¹⁸⁴ He disagreed with the views of another Shakespearean critic, Steevens, about Much Ado About Nothing:

Steevens says, that in the conduct of the fable, there is an imperfection similar to that which Dr Johnson has pointed out in The Merry Wives of Windsor. The second contrivance is less ingenious than the first; or, to speak more plainly, the same incident is become stale by repetition. I wish some other method had been contrived to trap Beatrice than that very one which had before been necessarily practised on Benedick.¹⁸⁵

Wilson dismisses this as 'a foolish wish',¹⁸⁶ and denied that the second contrivance was not less ingenious than the first. Equally, the chance of the same incident becoming stale by repetition would carry the same meaning 'if Mr Steevens had said that a kiss becomes stale

by repetition.¹⁸⁷ His own object, one day, was to write pastoral dramatic poetry, partly prose and partly verse, like The Winter's Tale and As You Like It.

Wilson refers incidentally to Shakespearean critics in his review of Mrs Jameson of February 1833. He praised her writings, noting, '...there is no society, however distinguished, that her fine genius, talents, and accomplishments, would not grace'¹⁸⁸ and her book, Characteristics of Women (1832) in two volumes were 'two truly delightful volumes.'¹⁸⁹ She had said countless things about women which had never before been expressed, and she examined Shakespeare's female characters in detail which had not been attempted before. Wilson reviewed her essays under the headings of Characters of the Affections; Characters of the Intellect; Characters of Passion and Imagination; and Historical Characters. Her essay on Lady Macbeth suggested that the character possessed certain characteristics overlooked by the horror of the play. Mrs. Jameson considered Lady Macbeth deserved pity and love, rather than hatred; she was not bad by nature, only by ambition. Also, Mrs Jameson points out that the first idea of murdering Duncan is not suggested by Lady Macbeth.

Twelve years later, in his Specimens of the British Critics, for February and March, 1845, Wilson considers the criticism of Dryden and Pope on Shakespeare. Dryden 'seems to have been a man of wavering principles, but warm and generous feelings'¹⁹⁰, and was praised by Johnson as 'a man whom every English generation must mention with reverence as a critic and a poet.'¹⁹¹ Wilson noted Dryden's approval of Shakespeare's control over the passions, but complained of the way he spoilt Shakespeare's plays. Pope was a critic whom Wilson described as 'one of the most amiable men that ever lived'.¹⁹² He had shown by his Preface to Shakespeare that he had 'a poetical heart',¹⁹³ and his object was to give a more accurate text to some of Shakespeare's plays.

Scattered references to other Shakespearean critics appear throughout his articles, and allusions are made to Coleridge, Bowles, Hughes, Hume, and Gifford. Wilson's criticism was in the tradition of fault-finding with his predecessors. He expresses his contempt for German criticism, although he praises Schlegel, commenting 'compare Voltaire with Schlegel! and what advance in the world's knowledge of the prophet and priest of nature!'¹⁹⁴

French criticism, led by Voltaire, denounced Shakespeare as a barbaric genius for his portrayal of naturalism on the stage, which offended their sense of taste. 'How the black-letter dogs barked at the Swan of Avon!'¹⁹⁵ Wilson commented. Dryden, Pope, and Johnson followed rules, therefore they were prejudiced and bigoted. Lamb, although a contemporary Romantic critic, had failed to grasp that the imagination was not an isolated principle and needed sharing with the audience and actors. Only Mrs Jameson was the critic nearest in spirit to that of Shakespeare. Her criticism showed that she alone had recognised the sublime principle of art derived from the Greeks that Shakespeare copied in his genius.

Wilson remarked that the acting of Shakespeare's plays was the test of a really great actor, and he relates his comments to the two great actors of the day, Mrs Siddons, and John Kemble. In a review of Miss Fanny Kemble's *Tragedy*, April 1832, he pays a tribute: 'Shakespeare's self had learned something then from a sight of Siddons.'¹⁹⁶ He mentions Boaden's *Life of Siddons*, and also refers to the book Mrs Siddons herself wrote about Lady Macbeth, in which she argues that Lady Macbeth deserves love and pity, not hatred. She also notes that Lady Macbeth should be a blonde beauty, not dark, as that was the colour most likely to appeal to Macbeth's mind. Later, in 1849, Wilson remarked that he was 'always inclined to conceive Lady Macbeth's night-walking as 'the summit, or top-most peak of all tragic conception and execution - in Prose, too, the crowning of Poetry!'¹⁹⁷ He pays particular attention to the poetical treatment used in the showing of Lady Macbeth.

In the *Noctes* of March, 1827, the Shepherd asks, 'Where's the playactors and playactresses that can act Shakespeare's characters, noo that John Kemmel and Mrs Siddons is baith dead?'¹⁹⁸ Also, in the review of Miss Fanny Kemble's *tragedy*, April, 1832, he refers to Kemble: 'No other actor in our day ever was Hamlet. In reading that tragedy, nobody now pretends to understand the character - in seeing it performed by John Kemble, everybody felt it, gods and men----'¹⁹⁹. The greatness of his Hamlet, Wilson considered, lay in his sustained control, but he disagreed with Kemble's acting in the scene where Hamlet tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery. In an earlier article of February, 1818, he commented that the genius of Kemble seemed to desert him, and he 'threw an air of fierceness and anger over

the mein and gestures of Hamlet, which must have been far removed from the imagination of Shakespeare. It was reserved for Kean to restore nature from her profanation.²⁰⁰

The idea of sympathetic imagination began, in the 1760s and 1770s, to change acting styles and to affect the audience's reaction, especially to scenes of pathos and terror. Aaron Hill, in his Essay on the Art of Acting in which the Dramatic Passions are Properly Defined and Described (1779), warned that if an actor is to be successful, his "Imagination must conceive a strong idea of the passion" to be represented, and he "never must attempt its imitation, till his fancy has conceived so strong an image, or idea, of it, as---when it is undesigned and natural."²⁰¹ Wilson's remarks relate to the style of the actors, that is, romantic or classical. The actors on which he commented were 'natural', and appealed to nature. As Wilson noted, although too young himself to have seen Garrick act on the stage, he believed that the actor-manager had brought plays into line with classical decorum and theatrical taste. He adapted Shakespeare to fashionable and popular taste, and Wilson remarked that he 'murdered, or, almost as bad, mutilated Shakespeare.'²⁰² However, his individual control of production and performance set a pattern that continued. He had established art on nature and produced a sudden revolution in acting. The effect of his genius on all hearts and minds was shown by his understanding of Shakespeare, which was never surpassed, if equalled, by the power of any other actor. Garrick thought it was his job to study the mind and motives of his characters, and Shakespeare presented the greatest challenge. In his endeavour to present pictorial realism, he was accused of interfering with the text of Shakespeare. All the actors deal with effect, and their aim was to please the audience. They aimed at a visual effect, and produced a sense of reality, but also showed a tendency to alter Shakespeare as a result. Wilson wondered what Shakespeare himself would have thought of some of the performances had he been able to come and see a production. Garrick showed attention to costume, which was subordinate to character, but more important than scenery. He admired and adored Shakespeare, and entered into the spirit of his plays, and Wilson concluded that he had raised the stage into an enlightened and intellectual profession.

Few would now agree that the Dies Boreales contain 'some of the most profound and original criticisms on Macbeth and Othello that have ever been written.'²⁰³ But despite his obvious limitations of inconsistency, and a rhapsodical style, Wilson is of interest as a Shakespearean critic. His comments were in accordance with the time, concerning the passions, the imagination, and characterisation. He was the first amongst Romantic critics to draw attention to the myth of Double Time, and to show a criticism of Shakespeare's tragedies that had classical roots. His greatest strength was his response to Shakespeare and the stage, considering the plays as stage plays, and providing a feeling for gesture and action. He wrote of Hamlet that the scene where he rushes into Ophelia's chamber and confides in her about his grief and distraction, is to him 'the most terrifically affecting scene in Shakespeare. Neither Lear, nor Othello are plunged so deep in the gulf of misery.'²⁰⁴ Wilson summarises his position as a Shakespeare critic:

A dazzling spell is upon us that veils from our apprehension all incompatibilities - all impossibilities - for he dips the Swan-quill in Power - and Power is that which you must accept from him, and so to the utter oblivion, while we read and behold, of them all. To go to work with such inquiries is to try to articulate thunder. What do I intend? That Shakespeare is only to be criticised? Apollo forbid - forbid the Nine! I intend Prologemena to the criticism of Shakespeare. I intend mowing and burning the bramble before ploughing the soil. I intend showing where we must not look for the Art and the Genius of Shakespeare, as a step to discovering where we must. I suspect - I know - that Criticism has oscillated from one extreme to another, in the mind of the country - from denying all art, to acknowledging consummated art, and no flaw. I would find the true Point. Stamped and staring upon the front of these tragedies is a conflict. He, the poet, beholds Life - he, the Poet, is on the Stage. The littleness of the Globe Theatre mixes with the greatness of the Scene-shifters. I think that when we have stripped away the disguises and incumbrances of the Power, we shall see, naked, and strong, and beautiful, the statue moulded by Jupiter.²⁰⁵

Conclusion

Beauty, Good, and Knowledge are three sisters
That doat upon each other, friends to man,
Living together under the same roof,
And never can be sunder'd without tears.

Tennyson¹

The purpose of this thesis has been to show Wilson's position as a critic, and we can conclude by summarising his achievements in terms of the principles expressed in these reviews. Criticism was his metier because he loved literature, noting that, 'Among the pleasures and pursuits of our ordinary life there are none which take stronger hold on minds of intelligence and sensibility than those of literature'.² The BM gave him, as a professional literary critic, the medium in which he could expand his views on the great and small in Scottish life, and on his interest in human nature, and bring knowledge and literature to the people, and thereby moral instruction. His criticisms are generalities rather than analysis, and are connected to particular examples. They are written within the limitations of necessity, and off-set by the tendencies of the time, to suppress imagination and bring forward science. In the Noctes he had shown scattered criticism, and he developed from this to poetical reviews. But Wilson intended to be useful, noting that pain and disappointment come to all in life, but it can be alleviated by Poetry and Religion. Like Wordsworth, he united the inner and outer world, and by stimulating the imagination he thought one could develop the spiritual life, best seen in poetry and music. Wilson did not aim to change taste, that was for the poets, only to improve the quality of life.

Periodical criticism had become very important at this time, and Wilson, as 'Christopher North', with his critical besom, swept the way forward with the BM. He was led by his passion for Scotland, which was only surpassed by his love for his wife and family. He was determined that, as a Scottish institution, founded by Scottish scholars, the BM

should lead the way with philosophical criticism. He personified the BM and was its principal support and inspiration. He made the BM into a Library of Useful Knowledge, which was aimed at all levels of society. All people possessed imagination, and with cultivation this could be developed and they could respond to beauty in Art and Nature. Religion and Poetry blended in the Scottish consciousness, and as 'a trusty guide and cheerful companion'³ Wilson appealed to the character of the Scottish people. By training their minds he encouraged them to appreciate their culture and heritage, while admitting that England had the supremacy of literature. His criticism was therefore national in the widest sense, but looking towards Scotland as its intellectual centre.

As expected from his many-sided character, Wilson's criticism has its defects and its merits, its strengths and its weaknesses. Hallam described him as 'a writer of the most ardent and enthusiastic genius, whose eloquence is as the rush of mighty waters.'⁴ His colleague, William Maginn, wrote an estimate of him for Fraser's Magazine, in the flamboyant style favoured by Maginn, Lockhart, and Christopher North in BM:

"What can be said of Professor Wilson worthy of his various merits? Nothing ... A poet, who having had the calamity of obtaining Oxford prizes, and incurred the misfortune of having been praised by the Edinburgh Review for some juvenile indiscretions in the way of rhyme, wrote The City of the Plague, which even the envious Lord Byron placed among the great works of the age, and which all real critics put higher than his poetical lordship's best productions in the way of tragedy; a moral professor who dings down the fame of Dugald Stewart ... an orator who, sober or convivial, morning and evening, can pour forth gushes of eloquence the most stirring, and fun the most rejoicing; a novelist who has chosen a somewhat peculiar department, but who, in his Lights and Shadows, etc., gives forth continually fine touches of original thought, and bursts of real pathos; a sixteen stoner who has tried it without the gloves with the game chicken, and got none the worse, a cocker, a racer, a sixbottler, a twenty-four tumblerer, an out and outer, a true, upright, knocking-down, poetical, prosaic, moral, professorial, hard-drinking, fierce-eating, good-looking, honourable, straightforward Tory ... A Gipsy, a

magazine, a wit, a six-foot club man, an unflinching ultra in the worst of times! In what is he not great?"⁵

In his book, Thomas Carlyle as a Critic of Literature, F.W. Roe states that there are four requisites for a critic: insight, knowledge, sympathy and detachment. There is also honesty and sincerity. Wilson possessed the first three in large measure, but was rarely able to remain detached. His personality entered every review, dominating it, and turning it into a teaching exercise. In addition he was vain, an egoist, who resented Tennyson's sobriquet of 'Crusty Christopher'.⁶ His self-contradictions, of saying one thing and doing another, produced his lack of a 'tie-beam' and his uneven criticism. His enthusiasm led to exaggeration, and justified Strout's claim that 'moods not principles moved him'.⁷

There are certain merits in Wilson's works. His sympathy was wide and generous, and without sympathy there cannot be knowledge. There were certain ways of obtaining and producing knowledge at this time. Wilson noted that knowledge was power, and it was also virtue. Power appealed to what Wilson most admired, great writers and teachers, and mountains. It was the basis of his literature, and his standpoint was emotional. Passion ruled his life, by instinct and intuition rather than by design. He does not define power, except by association, such as 'rivers, noting 'the chief rivers possess all the attributes essential to greatness -width-depth-clearness-rapidity-in one word, power'.⁸ Like Wordsworth he thought the antithesis between knowledge and power was the basis of taste. It was linked with the sublime, and these are the two most frequently used words in his criticism, in both an objective and a subjective sense. He distinguished between the knowledge of all men, and the knowledge of the poet. His emphasis on poetic power, and the sublime, suggests a division between literature and non-literature.

Wilson was a critic who was also a poet; he possessed the observation, and the poetic sensibility, and sense of beauty of a nature lover. Criticism was his true sense of being, and was an expression of feeling. He followed the impulse of his sensibility and his heart and gave himself up to his thoughts, 'Yes! all we have to do is to let down their lids - to will what our eyes shall see - and lo! there it is - a creation!⁹ as he remarked. His

knowledge and sense of colour and images and reality coloured many of his lines, and he created a poetic climate. His poetic understanding equalled his analysis, and his understanding was shown as much by his choice of texts as in the way he used them. A good poem and a good poet were not enough; one must be spiritually and morally uplifted and the mind enlightened. One must understand poetry and oneself; the reader and the text must make a whole.

The distinguishing characteristic of his nature is his love of the beautiful in natural objects. His love of nature, and natural scenery, and his pictorial powers of description, bear comparison with those of Ruskin and Carlyle. The Recreations contain essays where his eye, 'full of the "lightnings of genius"'¹⁰ has often shown greater radiance as it revealed some new glory of nature. His descriptions of mountain scenes, and the Lakes are scarcely to be surpassed, but his range is narrower here than Ruskin's. His power of observation, and the intensity of his love, takes you to the mountains and the clouds, to the meadow and the lake, to the ocean and the rock. His visual descriptions vibrate to the memory, and by association some picture is vividly conjured up, such as in "Streams", and "Cottages", in a series of monologues on the Moors, the Lakes, the Seasons, and in many a bright passage in the Noctes. He also loved natural history, and as an ornithologist, his keen observation records birds of ordinary Scottish species, from buzzard, falcon, and hen-harrier, to the mavis and the merles, and their sounds.

His style was characteristic of his personality. It was like the rushing of a strong river, whose every tone from the lightest ripple to the thunder of the waterfall is wonderfully melodious. Of his writings, it has been remarked that he 'approaches more nearly than any modern since Burke, to that wild prophetic movement of style and manner which the bards of Israel exhibit - nay, more nearly even than Burke, since with Wilson it is a perpetual afflatus'.¹¹ Whether as a writer or an orator, he passed from 'grave to gay, from lively to severe'.¹² One can see him change from the sombre description of his essays on the philosophers, to the heights of his description of Shelley, and the depths of Shakespeare's plays. His 'eloquent pen'¹³ flew, as he wrote almost from inspiration, and to that inspiration came the dash and fire which turned even dull subjects into bright reading.

His humour is an aspect of his style best seen in the Noctes which sparkle with wit and humour. His Rabelaisian habits of conviviality are carried into these dialogues, where he dashes off his lucubrations. They are especially personified in the character of the Shepherd, whose speeches in the Noctes contain some of the best Doric in Scottish literature.

Wilson had a particular regard for the poetic form and the beauty and eloquence of words. The rhythm and the musical sound and intonation of poetry appealed to his musical ear. Like Wordsworth, he admired figurative language, and his criticism is strongly image-based.

The all-pervading characteristic of his writings, to which they owe most of all their originality and worth, is his Christianity. It is the highest aspect of his character, and his religious spirit is drawn to poetry which reflected the divine. The sense of the spiritual runs through his criticism. His moral grandeur was incapable of envy or jealousy, and, as he remarked, 'Animosities are mortal, but the Humanities live for ever.'¹⁴ His kindness, and generous feelings, were particularly noticeable for the young, whether as a teacher for his students, or for an aspiring writer in the BM, or for the young and vulnerable in nature.

It is in his articles on the poets that he reveals his critical judgement. His poetic sensibility is shown in his sympathetic strength of analysis, his quick perception and development of some idea, his enthusiastic elucidation of relevant passages where he interprets the inner mind of the poet. Similarly, his immediate disclosure of a commonplace behind a rhapsodical disguise, and the originality with which he disputes accepted opinions.

Despite Strout's assertion that 'moods not principles moved him',¹⁵ it is possible to trace a poetic theory in Wilson's writings. In the first chapter I discussed the analysis of the romantic imagination, which is to create Wholes, and provide an effect of pleasure and peace. It is the faculty by which we discern the beautiful, which is an aspect of mind. Wilson defined its process in literature, and the materials on which it works, whether in Nature or Art. Feeling is the essence of the imagination, and when feeling and high intellect are found together we have the poets. They possessed the 'Genius of the soul'¹⁶ and their importance is their vision, and 'where there is no vision the people perish'.¹⁷ Wilson

regretted that the present age had seen the imagination go into the Arts, believing that it should be a part of life itself. The elements of imagination were human existence, and only Burns had shown the link between imagination and community. Great poets had drawn from the people for their poetry, and what he admired in Wordsworth and Burns was the fact that they were poets of the poor, and were their benefactors. Poetry should be simple, and he criticised Tennyson for not drawing his early poetry from life; it was too ornate and fanciful.

Wilson had affinities with other critics, namely Hazlitt, whom he resembled in power of the passions, and sympathy; Coleridge, his transcendentalism and idealism; and Alison, on taste. With all these critics he showed the same keen observation, and the 'metaphysical' eye necessary to explore the wonders of the spiritual world.

What he had achieved is best summarised in his descriptions on natural scenery, rather than as a literary critic. Although his literary criticism is interesting, and is responsible for bringing forward Wordsworth and Tennyson in the BM to the public's attention, it is too fragmentary and lacks a coherent system to justify his being a great critic. Like Wordsworth, he was aware of the spiritual dimension in nature, and had made natural history popular with all readers. He taught them about God, whether inside the classroom or out-of-doors. Science could be beautiful, and Wilson showed that it could also be interesting. At the beginning of this thesis, I quoted Coleridge's dictum that people are either born Aristotelians or Platonians, but I would suggest that Wilson's position is neither one nor the other. He remained a realist from the Scottish School of Commonsense, and never lost his awareness that metaphysics underlay all outward existence. He also wanted imagination to become a force of life, and for people to be cultivated and enjoy an awareness of the spiritual dimension of life. It was through the development and cultivation of the imagination that Wilson taught men to admire, to see not so much the beauty of holiness, but rather the holiness of beauty.

APPENDIX

Bibliography of Wilson's Critical Writings

- A. List of Blackwood's Magazine articles attributed to Wilson: 1817-1825
- B. Wilson's contributions to Blackwood's Magazine from 1826

Appendix A. List of Blackwood's Magazine articles attributed to Wilson, 1817-1825.

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Note: Contributions to BM, unless otherwise indicated, are quoted from A.L. Strout: A Bibliography of Articles in Blackwood's Magazine, traced from Wilson's letters to William Blackwood.

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February	Birds	8
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April	Streams	29
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August P. 1	Gymnastics	23
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	The Four Shops	3.5
Sept.	Hints for the Holidays, No. 3	28.5
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March	Noctes	17
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June	Persian Women	12
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May	2 Life of Burns	46
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May	Do.	15
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	Noctes	
December	Noctes	34
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	The Age - a Poem	11
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	The Mariner's Return	11
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July	Bear-Hunting	23
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2.	Wild Fowl Shooting	11

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February	Odyssey	30
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April	Baron Smith	11.5
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September	Do.	17
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September	The Modern Dunciad	12
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July	The Metaphysician, No. 2	9
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December	Lays of Ancient Rome	22.5
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Note: Mrs Gordon said, 'I had hoped at one time to be able to give a complete list of my father's contributions from the commencement of the *Magazine*, but the materials for fixing the authorship with certainty in every instance do not exist.'

Footnotes to Part A : Introduction

Introduction

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1. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 8, p. 35
2. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 7, p. 386
3. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 7, p. 387
4. Noctes No. 20 (April 1829), p. 231
5. Noctes No. 20 (April 1829), p. 225
6. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 8, p. 252
7. Noctes No. 20 (April 1829), p. 224
8. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 8, p. 102
9. Noctes No. 20 (April 1829), p.234
10. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 8, p.102
11. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 8, p. 223
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- a) Wilson's Birth and Early Years

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 43. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 10, p.374
 44. Works ed. J. Ferrier, 5, p.207
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